

**Theorising the Academic Viva in Norwegian  
Higher Education.**

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**Institute of Education, London University**

**Dissertation for Doctor of Philosophy (PhD)**



I declare that, except where explicit attribution is made, the work presented in this thesis is my own

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**Theorising the Academic Viva in Higher  
Education. A Qualitative Argument**

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## Abstract

This dissertation argues that the academic viva in higher education is a social practice organised around a limited number of re-occurring language games. Also, central to this argument is the role of examiner judgments and constructs, along with the understanding of the viva and accompanying examiner meetings as narratives that not only possess plots, beginnings, middles and ends, but are multi-accented, multi-directional and multi-punctual. These arguments are investigated in three research questions, and a theory of the academic viva in higher education is proposed in the final chapter.

The first research question asks: **Why study the viva?** This question is answered by looking at the genealogy of the viva through history, its under-theorisation in research and its significance for existential, social and integrative experiences.

Research on the academic viva, with some notable exceptions has been limited to questionnaires sent to participants, interviews and the analysis of policy documents in different higher education institutions. This dissertation breaks new ground because it is based upon the filming of the viva and accompanying examiner meetings before (setting preliminary grade) and after the viva (setting final grade). Norwegian higher education is chosen as a case study and in particular the post-graduate Master in Education viva. The data is scrutinised with the tools of conversation analysis, making it possible to answer the second research question: **How is the viva ‘talked into being’?**

Assessment theory has been concerned with ascertaining the reliability, generalisability, transparency, justice and accountability of particular instances and forms of assessment. Determining the validity of a form of assessment has been considered of secondary importance. This dissertation argues that the validity component should not be neglected. As a consequence the third research question is: **What would a validity argument look like for the viva?** To answer this question, the filmed post-graduate data is re-visited, along with additional instances of the viva at the under-graduate level in the disciplines of Education and Travel and Tourism.

## Acknowledgements

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## Preface

In very truth, we have become an  
'assessment society', as wedded to  
our belief in the power of numbers,  
grades, targets and league tables to  
deliver quality and accountability,  
equality and defensibility as we are  
to modernism itself.

Broadfoot and Black (2004)

The writers of this comment were pointing to global trends characterised by the penetration of modernist assumptions about assessment grounded upon calls for rational control, efficiency and cost-effectiveness. As another commentator (Scott, 1998: 34) has put it, 'tests are among the primary mechanisms that we use to "norm" ourselves and locate ourselves within societal hierarchies.' Reforms of higher education seek to introduce electronic student portfolios, university results are published and there is a greater pressure towards considering students as sources of quantifiable, human capital. In the wake of education policy designed to maximise quantifiable outcomes, a significant doubt has been cast over traditional, established forms of assessment. But, has enough research been undertaken to document and evaluate present forms of assessment practice? Moreover, in the 'desire for reliability and on improving statistical techniques...what are often neglected are the validity issues' (Stobart 2004:5) and in this respect, an examination of their values and consequences.

With these points in mind, this dissertation is limited to an investigation of one form of assessment in higher education – one likely to be discarded because of the pressure of increased student numbers, and its high cost compared to other forms of assessment – the academic *viva voce*. It goes ‘against the grain’ of modern trends towards mass examination and represents, at one and the same time, a pre-modern and post-modern form of assessment. The former, because it belongs to a form of assessment with roots in the Middle Ages; the latter, because on each occasion when it takes place, it holds the potential for ‘new narrative moves’ that are non-standardised.

Contemporary research on the viva, both internationally and in Scandinavia, has faced the difficulty of gaining permission to research them as they actually take place. This has meant that understanding what is ‘actually happening’ in the viva as a social practice, in terms of how it is accomplished and ‘talked into being’, has been significantly under-researched and under-theorised.

Norway is chosen as the site for research. Its choice as a case is not accidental. First, permission has been obtained to film pre-viva examiner meetings, the viva and the post-viva examiner meetings where the grade is fixed for a limited number of Master in Education vivas, and 2<sup>nd</sup> year under-graduate Education vivas. A number of similar examiner meetings and vivas for a Travel and Tourism BA were observed. Permission to film is difficult, if not impossible to obtain in other countries, take for example the doctoral viva in the UK. Second, the education viva in Norway resonates with other kinds of academic (question and answer) viva held elsewhere in the world: candidates defend a 50,000 word written dissertation in the case of the Norwegian Master in Education and 3,000-5,000 word assignments in the undergraduate viva<sup>1</sup>. Thirdly, the Master in Education is chosen in preference to the doctoral viva in Norway because in the latter the viva is not a ‘high stake’ assessment. It functions as a ceremonial event with the candidate not being allowed to take the doctoral *disputas* until the

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<sup>1</sup> Recently the length of the Norwegian Master in Education dissertation has begun to vary, from 25000 to 50000 words, depending upon the regulations in the different Norwegian universities. I have tutored 9 Master in Education dissertations to completion (including the viva), and examined 10, as either the internal or external examiner. The filmed master dissertations were all 50000 word in length.

submitted dissertation has been approved for public defence by a board of examiners<sup>2</sup>. This results in a situation where extremely few candidates fail the *disputas* and the degree is not awarded<sup>3</sup>. With the Master in Education in Norway, everything is at stake, and the candidate faces an existential situation where they can fail, pass or even improve on the provisional grade awarded by the examiners. Accordingly, the first question asked in this dissertation seeks to answer in more detail, why study the viva? The argument made is that it is necessary to explore the history of professional and academic viva, their under-theorisation, and the kind of functions, social practices and existential experiences to which it gives rise.

It is not until part II of the dissertation that the exploration of the viva is narrowed from professional and academic viva to the latter. This narrowing to the academic viva makes it possible to concentrate the focus. Collecting and analysing empirical data on performance vivas in the arts (such as the architectural student defending a drawing or a dancer's dance and explaining it in the viva), professional vivas and academic vivas would have meant that each form could not have been researched in sufficient detail. Comparison between the different forms of viva is deferred until the final chapter, where the discussion is more general than empirical in character.

A limited number of people enter a room and gather around a table, questions are asked and the candidate attempts to answer them. Participants are talking and the question that can be asked by researchers is: how is the viva talked into being? To be able to answer this question, rooted in a constructivist understanding of the activity, a limited number of post-graduate master vivas and other vivas from under-graduate university programs were filmed. Conversation analysis is a natural place to start when it comes to analysing the filmed viva (Have, 1999; Heath and Hindmarsh, 2002). While this research tool is used with minor

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<sup>2</sup> To date, I have sat in two doctoral committees for Norwegian doctorates (2007 and 2008); approving the dissertations, such that I was later one of the *opponents*, as it is termed in Norwegian, in the public disputations. I have attended in the region of 10 public doctoral disputations since the mid 90s.

<sup>3</sup> There exist public statistics in Norway on the number who annually pass doctorates in different subjects in the different universities. But, there exist no public statistics on failures, and in Oslo University's Institute of Education, to take an example, the figures kept reveal only the length of time registered and when they pass.

adjustments, a second research tool is also developed; one based upon narratology. It focuses upon the narratives created and cited by participants as sources of legitimacy for their own arguments.

The final question asked in this dissertation explores how to reach a judgment on the academic viva as a form of assessment practice in higher education. This usually entails asking about fitness for purpose, validity, reliability, transparency, accountability and justice (Stobart, 1999). Early 20<sup>th</sup> century research on the viva was dominated by the concern with inter-rater reliability. Following Crooks *et al.* (1996) the argument will be made that the reliability is only an element in a validity argument of an assessment. Messick's definition (1989) of validity and the work of Cherryholmes (1988) add to this perspective by arguing that validity involves examining the constructs used by assessors and the empirical and theoretical rational supporting judgments of their validity, as well as their values and social consequences. Put simply, the validation process as a social practice is important and not merely the final assertion of validity (or its lack). A typical psychological construct found in many assessment practices (Pellegrino *et al.*, 2001) is evidence of cognitive reasoning. While it might be expected that in the viva there is a similar interest in cognitive reasoning, analysis of empirical data must determine if this is in fact the case. Revealing and reflecting upon the constructs and their validity is a focal point in the third part of the dissertation, along with the judgments made by the examiners.

Accordingly three research questions are posed in this dissertation:

1. Why study the viva?
2. How is the viva 'talked into being'?
3. What would a validity argument look like for the viva?

Question 1. seeks to provide a broad framework and background for research and debate on the viva. Question 2. focuses on generating research data on the academic viva. Question 3. re-visits the debate on validity in a critical fashion and applies it to the viva as a form of assessment.

The insights gained from answering these three questions make it possible to theorise the academic viva in higher education. One of the few theorisations of the viva, by Trafford and Leshem (2002, 2002a), made social dynamics, emotional and scholarly resilience and the construct of doctorateness created by participants the key elements in their theory of synergy. The theory proposed in this dissertation critically assesses their contribution and draws upon a number of other theoretical approaches, such as conversation analysis, narratology and the theory of language games. This dissertation has a secondary goal, to foreground policy debate on the viva as a valued form of assessment. A debate, it is hoped, that will be founded upon reasoned argumentation and research, rather than anecdotes and memorable reflections, whether positive or negative.

# Introduction

The candidates for the exams are the yearly lambs, some of whom have to be sacrificed at the examination table, in order to maintain the socially necessary common knowledge

Kvale (1990)

## **Narratives of success and disappointment**

For six years I researched refugee work in a middle-sized Norwegian municipality. The dissertation was submitted in the spring of 1999 and a date in the early autumn was set for the viva. As the day of the viva drew closer, and I began my journey by boat to Newcastle from Bergen, I felt a certain anxiety: I had no guarantee that I would pass the viva. All the work might be in vain. My apprehension on the way to the room where the two examiners waited for me increased when my supervisor said, ‘95% of candidates do not get through on their first try’. It was a strange comment; had he already conferred with the examiners and knew my fate? My viva began at 2 pm, and finished at 4.45 pm. I was told to wait in the corridor while the two examiners arrived at their final decision. They awarded me the PhD on the condition that I made some minor revisions. I had been ‘grilled’ for almost 3 hours without an intermission. They were consensual in their dislike for the manner in which I had used and interpreted the work of certain theorists (e.g. Foucault), my methodology and my narrowing of the research topic to refugees in a small (Scandinavian) country. In the course of the viva, I felt an adrenalin kick as I answered question

after question, arguing rationally and self-critically. I refused to buckle under the pressure.

Did I resent this kind of viva? On the one hand, this was not a ceremonial kind of viva, where I might have been told on entering the room that I had passed, and that a pleasant academic conversation would follow. In the viva for my Magister in Sociology in Norway in 1990 (defending a 247 page dissertation after a public lecture and two 10 hour written exams), the first sentence of one of the examiners had been, 'I hope we can be finished in 45 minutes because I have a train to catch.' The result in his opinion was already a foregone conclusion. In my PhD viva, I had had to defend my research and ideas, like a salmon swimming up-stream. On the other hand, I have looked back on this viva and wondered if it had been too private an affair, with too much at stake. In the Norwegian doctoral *disputas*, whilst the candidate might well feel grilled and in public, he or she is not as existentially exposed to failure. The candidate already knows the dissertation has been approved by the examining committee before the public disputation is arranged. I cannot recall having heard of a candidate failing the *disputas*. In this respect, the Norwegian doctoral viva is a low stake event. (Stephen Dobson, personal reflections)

This narrative was one of success, and it had social consequences; I was able to obtain tenure and I went on to have a fine tutorial relationship with the internal examiner (Professor Richard Johnson) who helped me revise and edit my PhD for publication by an international publisher. Not all narratives have such a happy ending. Some years ago, I interviewed a candidate for a PhD in England; she had failed her viva and experienced an examiner thumping her dissertation down on the table in anger. The following case tells the tale of another unsuccessful candidate:

The following events in Norway, were discussed on a university net newspaper (*Universitas*, 2005) and some documents relating to



the case were published on the supervisor's web-page (Otnes and Rånes, 2005). The latter were originally confidential, but one of the recipients of the documents forwarded them, and thereafter, they became public. The event in question was the Master in Sociology dissertation by Odd Iver Rånes (2004) entitled *Fellesskap – på godt eller vondt* (Community – for Good or Evil).

The exam committee informed the candidate of the F grade, meaning a fail. According to exam regulations, he was not allowed to defend his thesis in front of the examiners. He was only allowed to receive an oral explanation for the grade. He appealed, and a new committee came to the same conclusion. Once again, he was not allowed to sit a viva, and all the examiners were unanimous in their judgment.

Otnes, the supervisor, then asked several well-known sociologists/urban researchers to read the thesis and comment upon its merits and weaknesses. Whilst finding weaknesses, none of them could agree on these weaknesses, and furthermore, 3 of them decided it should have been awarded a grade somewhere between B and D, while the 3 others thought that F was a less than likely grade.

Otnes and Rånes (2005: 2) argued that the events constituted a case of *sensurmord*, meaning in judicial terms, 'judged on a wrong or suspect foundation'.

Narratives of success and failure appear to be typical when people are asked to reflect upon their experiences of assessment in educational contexts. If these narratives are told on several occasions and clothed in the rational language of the social sciences, they may with time escape a signifier of assigned mythical status and be regarded as the fruits of scientific deliberation. Some of Kvale's (1993: 223) reflections on the Scandinavian *viva*, are a case in point. In the following extract, examiners in the first instance are seen to cover-up any disagreement on how the final grade had been reached:

First phase – in the examination situation...“It was astonishing how much we were in agreement and despite the fact that we come from widely different theoretical approaches to the field.”

Second phase – at the party after the examination...”There were, though, a few cases with a certain disagreement; we met with slightly different proposals for a grade, but after some discussion we arrived at full agreement about the final grade.”

Third phase – after some drinks....the evaluative consensus may become utterly demolished – “Well, there was once a case...” The examiner then may come up with a long and emotional account of an examination with marked disagreements about the final grade.

What is a cause for concern, with ‘stories’ such as these, both my own, Kvale’s and the one narrating the case of Rånes, is precisely their gaining the tag of scientific status or recognition. Especially when researchers, with few notable exceptions (Trafford and Leshem, 2002; Roberts *et al.*, 2000), have failed to seek or gain permission to observe what is actually taking place in the viva or in examiner meetings. In such a situation and on the basis of available ‘stories’, it might soon be believed that not just some, but all examination committees cover-up discord, presenting a united front to the candidate. Kvale’s (1990, 1993, 2000) views for instance have been published in several academic texts and this might lend credence to their scientific status, even if he has noted that his reflections were based upon ‘informal observations and reports’. Some of the documents around the Rånes case were published on the internet, to the unease of university authorities in Oslo. The author of some of these documents was Per Otnes, who in addition to being the candidate’s supervisor is a well-respected, although at times controversial professor in Sociology. This might also have lent weight to the scientific status of his reflections on Rånes’s dissertation, and the viva that did not take place.

The motivation for this dissertation is a desire to move beyond these personal narratives and largely anecdotal reflections, and to argue for a more theoretically

and empirically founded understanding of the academic viva. This is not however, to argue that in the course of this dissertation my theoretical perspective and empirical data may or will reveal the sole or universal truth of the viva. Instead, in the spirit of Nietzsche, my intention is to argue that it is not a question of revealing 'what is the truth', but of exploring the plural 'truths' of the academic viva, and the conditions and interests that might support different theoretical and empirical understandings of the viva.

Part I of the dissertation considers the plural truths of the professional and academic viva from a historical perspective (Chapter 1), in contemporary academia (Chapter 2) and from the theoretical perspectives of functionalism, social practices and existentialism (chapter 3). Parts II and III of this dissertation move away from a plural, multi-faceted understanding of the professional and academic viva, in order to develop my own theoretical and empirical understanding of the academic viva in a particular setting (Norwegian higher education). My theoretical and empirical approach does not however represent a complete break from the ideas presented and discussed in Part I; I retain a primary focus upon the social practices of the viva, and draw upon selected contemporary understandings of assessment practices in general e.g. the work of Messick on validity is touched upon briefly in Chapter 2 and in more depth in Part III, Chapter 6.

Moreover, the theoretical and empirical platform developed in parts II and III will be judged to have critical potential if it can be drawn upon, along with insights from Part I, to propose a theory of the viva. This is the goal of Chapter 8, when policy implications and lines for future research are proposed for discussion.

Before proceeding, a preliminary question must be addressed. Is the object of study the viva, the disputation or the *disputas*? I shall answer this question by looking at the etymology of the viva.

### **The etymology of the viva**

In Anglo-Saxon parts of the world, the word used for an oral examination is the viva, coming from the Latin *viva voce*, meaning 'by the living voice'. In other

European countries, the word disputation (*disputas* in Norwegian) is used. This is more in keeping with the word used in ancient times and the Middle Ages.

With respect to the term viva, Park (2003) in a recent essay suggests that the term was used to denote examinations conducted orally in 1842. He contends however, that the etymology of the word can be traced as far back as 1563. The viva was then known as a rule of conduct in Parliament when discussion was to be in an orderly, oral fashion, and Sir Thomas Smith used it in a work published in 1583 ([www.Britannica](http://www.Britannica)). Such a usage was not connected with an examination.

Park's declares his main source is the Merriam Webster Online Dictionary (<http://www.m-w.com>). Another dictionary, the Oxford English Dictionary (<http://www.oed.com>) carries references to the viva examination dating to the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century:

If a man has done his paperwork either very well or very badly, the 'viva' is almost formal (Westminster Gazette, 27.7.1897).

We shall laugh at our tutors and leave them to 'viva' themselves and be free (Frith, *Minstrelsy of Isis*, 1908: 190).

Facing them sat the youth who was being vivâed (Burke, *Barbara Goes to Oxford*, 1907).

It is notable that the examination is viewed as a possible source of torture, and yet also as something of no more than formal value; since the written work upon which the candidate is examined is considered decisive. Whatever the meaning, the dictionary highlights the memorable, existential quality of the viva, the implication being that it was not easily forgotten. The relation between the viva and a written dissertation and its existential quality is something to which I shall return (Chapter 3).

The modern Greek term for disputation, developed from the ancient Greek term, is *episimi akadimaiki sizitisi*. This means 'official academic discussion' or 'formal

academic discussion' (Margeti, personal communication, 9.4.04). For the actual term disputation as we know it, the Latin root is the source.

The modern word, disputation, comes from the Latin verb *disputare*, meaning the action of debating or addressing a controversial argument in public. *Disputare* is a compound verb, constructed from *dis*, meaning separately and *putare*, meaning to consider or think (Ayto, 1990: 176). In classical Latin the discussion it referred to was not one giving rise to heated emotions. In late Latin on the contrary – in the *Vulgate* for instance – it gained an association with acrimony, along with argument.

If we examine the texts of Cicero, who lived between 106-43 B.C., we find a passage mentioning talk of a friend reluctant to discuss, the phrase used is *ad disputandum*, who:

...had been stating views on oratory at large (SRD - in public), in debate with Antonius, and reasoning in the schools, and very much in the Greek mode (*De Oratore*, 1942a, book II, 13).

A little later Cicero asks in rhetorical fashion:

Are we new to debate of this disputational kind? (*Aut hominess ab hos genre disputationis alieni?*)

His assertion is that the Romans have inherited the public disputation from the Greeks. Fabius Quintilianus, writing in the first century A.D., confirms this when he talks of argumentation based upon 'the exercise of refuting and confirming' (*On Education and Oratory*, book 2.4, 18). The reference is to Aristotle's work on syllogism, as found in the *Topics*, and *Prior and Anterior Analytics*.

By the late Middle Ages the Latin noun *disputisoun* was gradually refashioned into the modern term disputation. For example Merlin writing in 1450 (<http://oed.com>) wrote the following:

So indured longe the disputacion between hem tweyne

Shakespeare used the word *disputation* in *Henry IV*, in order to denote an interchange, but of what kind is less certain:

I understand thy Kisses, and thou mine, And that's a feeling  
disputation.

By the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century we find Johnson (1758: §3) in *Idler no.19* writing the following:

In the heat of disputation.

The clearly examination oriented usage also dates to the 16<sup>th</sup> century, and the Oxford English Dictionary cites its usage in connection with matters of logic:

That is called a disputacion or reasoning of matters, when certaine  
persones debate a cause together, and one taketh part contrary vnto  
an other (Wilson, *Logike*, 1567: 61).

This brief etymology of the terms *viva* and *disputation*, reveals their diverse meanings through history and highlights how they have been connected to different social practices and interest groups. One meaning, connected with assessment practices and educational outcomes, has been the goal of measuring a person's level and understanding of a subject. A second observation is possible; both the terms *viva* and *disputation* share the meaning that oral activity is at times to do with the form or process of argumentation, which the Greeks called *dialectics* and *sylogism* (see Chapter 1).

In this dissertation, I shall use the word *viva* ('by the living voice') with the understanding that it incorporates, without eliminating the meanings and social practices of the earlier word *disputation*.

### **The life and death of the viva**

When the viva as a form of assessment is debated, it is usually through comparison with other forms of assessment, such as written and multiple choice examinations. Such a comparison is not a central goal in the empirical research undertaken in this dissertation. Nevertheless, there are occasions in the course of this dissertation when reference will be made to research reporting such comparisons. Levine and McGuire (1970) for example, found that the viva in higher education was particularly valid for the measurement of constructs connected with communication; multiple choice was superior for measuring recall and written examinations were as good when it came to the construct of interpretation.

Even though different skills might be assessed in different forms of assessment, the choice between assessment forms often relies on economic arguments; namely, that the viva is the most costly form of examination when large numbers of candidates are to be examined. In Norway, such economic argumentation, while true in terms of cost, has not meant that the viva has been abandoned. On the contrary, not only is the viva common in higher education (BA, Master, PhD), students attending high school for three years can expect to sit at least one viva in a random subject.

The transparency argument (Tinkler and Jackson, 2000) has been raised in UK debates on doctoral viva. It has been argued that the viva has been too much of a private event with the presence of non-examiners or the general public a rarely permitted occurrence. The viva can be a public event, as in the Norwegian doctoral *disputas*. The ‘anxiety’ and ‘nerve-racking experience’ of sitting a viva, in part it must be presumed because UK students are quite inexperienced in taking a viva, has been the topic of debate in publications (Murray, 2003; Jacks, 2002; Tinkler and Jackson, 2004) focusing on how to survive and master the viva.

The issues raised in contemporary debates can be illuminated and contrasted by adopting a historical perspective that examines the social practices of the viva in different periods. In the time of the Greeks for example, the viva had a different purpose, it was supported by different practices, such as reserved for philosophers and sons of the wealthy. After the rise of Christianity, the viva seemed to

disappear for long periods until the Middle Ages. Then the viva was seen as a more institutionalised social practice in universities and places of learning, and it sought to qualify candidates.

Therefore, it is not enough to simply say that it has always existed. Such a standpoint neglects to explore its function today, through history and the factors supporting and potentially eroding its existence. Nor can one simply say that it has been amply theorised, or that the existential anxiety it generates is unavoidable and necessary. These issues must be researched, and as a consequence the research question posed in Part I is:

### **Why study the viva?**

Accordingly, Chapter 1 looks at the history of viva in its different forms, Chapter 2 looks at current theorisations of the viva found in academic research, arguing that the viva has been under-theorised, and Chapter 3 looks at the function of the viva, its social practice and the kind of existential experiences it can generate. These three chapters, each in their own way, seek to answer the first of three research questions. At the same time, the two opening chapters in particular, provide an overview of existing research on the professional and academic viva. Part II of this dissertation (Chapters 4 and 5) narrows the focus to the academic viva.

### **The viva as a social practice ‘talked into being’**

One of the main arguments of Chapter 2 (Part I), is that the viva is an under-theorised topic in assessment practices. This is partly connected with the difficulties of gaining research access to a viva as they actually take place, and partly because, following from this, the empirical research that exists has reflected researchers who have made do with what they could more easily obtain; namely, interviews with the participants before and after the viva. Nevertheless, there are notable exceptions to this, such as Trafford and Leshem (2002, 2002a), whose research on the social dynamics of the viva is based upon participant observation and observation research of vivas (not including examiner meetings).



So, in my opinion, what is lacking is research on what actually takes place in the viva and its accompanying examiner meetings. In its broadest terms, the viva is an event based upon participants talking to each other. It is quite simply a social practice ‘talked into being’<sup>4</sup>. Assuming that this is the case, and it is hard to find arguments against such a view, the research question posed in Part II of the dissertation is:

### **How is the viva ‘talked into being?’**

If only sound recordings of vivas had been collected, this would have provided little indication of how the talked component was co-ordinated with corporeal movements (Heath, 2004; Heath and Hindmarsh, 2002). For this reason permission was obtained to film a limited number of Master in Education vivas and undergraduate education vivas in a Norwegian University College. Travel and Tourism vivas in the first year of a BA program, were also observed to gain additional insight into possible differences between post-graduate and undergraduate vivas, and between different under-graduate vivas. Even though it is hard to generalise statistically from the limited number of cases filmed and observed, it is possible to argue for an analytical generalisation (Bassey, 1999) to academic vivas held elsewhere in Scandinavia, and the world in general. Especially when it is understood that academic vivas are all based upon the question and answer format, where a previously submitted piece(s) of work is assessed through questions posed by the examiners.

The collection of Norwegian data on the viva was advantageous not only because research access had been obtained, but also because the examiners all had considerable experience of viva examining. To explore this experience, the examiners were filmed and several others were interviewed. This provided an insight into the background of the filmed vivas and helped to corroborate if and how the interviewed reflections matched the manner in which these examiners practiced examining (Interview guide no. 1 in appendix I). For example, in one particular instance, an examiner in an interview, and also at the beginning of a

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<sup>4</sup> The phrase ‘talked into being’ is taken from Heritage’s work on conversation analysis (1997: 162). The phrase also has existential connotations when written ‘talked into Being’.

filmed viva, stated that the viva should be conducted in the manner of Habermas's (1989) ideal speech situation, with the domination free conversation as its goal.

There are ethical issues connected with the filming of participants and how, and if, the camera may influence behaviour. Most forms of data collection where the researcher is present, risk exerting an influence upon informants, unless the collection methods are covert. In this dissertation all filmed participants voluntarily agreed to be filmed. The extent to which the camera influenced their statements is explored by studying references to the camera in the filmed viva, how participants have attuned their corporeal movements to the camera, and lastly, by questions to informants in interviews after the viva (see interview guide no. 2 in appendix I).

When it comes to analysing the data collected, the starting point is to look at the kind of social practices created in the viva. These can be understood as language games and forms of life, as argued in Chapter 3 (Part I) of the dissertation. In Chapters 4 and 5 (Part II) the argument developed is that conversation analysis and narratology can also be used to account for how the viva is talked into being. Conversation analysis has faced criticism for not considering the wider social, context related factors such as norms and rituals, in which talk takes place, and how they can structure the conversation. Titscher *et al.* (2000a: 113) have suggested that a way of doing this is to take on board a more ethnomethodological position, which seeks to reveal common sense meaning against a contextual background. Their lead is followed in that in addition to conversation analysis, common sense reasoning and background socio-cultural, economic and political factors are considered.

Narratology is conceptualised as the appeal to intrinsic and extrinsic narratives. The former dealing with the beginning, middle, end and plot structure of the viva (Czarniawska, 2004). The latter deals with narratives of knowledge used by participants to provide legitimacy for their statements (Boje, 2001; Dobson, 2005). The approach of narratology permits a study of the manner in which participants use narratives to dominate the flow of conversation. The narratives thus become a material expression of the power desired and achieved as the viva progresses from the beginning to its completion. The narrative that achieves

domination I shall term the master narrative. But its mastery is always potentially threatened when other participants propose narratives to counter this dominance. In the spirit of Lyotard (1986, 1988) I call these small narratives. Accordingly, power in this dissertation is not a thing or an object, but instead becomes a narrative respected by others, and with this respect come certain privileges attached to the roles of speaker and listener. Small narratives are those narratives that represent a questioning of the master narrative and the role of the person voicing this master narrative.

### **Validity**

It is not enough to know that the viva has a function, that it has existed historically and come to be a social practice providing participants with existential experiences. It is necessary to ask if it is a valid form of assessment, and a treatment of this question in terms of rational arguments will provide a scientific basis for asking if the viva should be allowed to survive; despite arguments that it is costly compared to other forms of assessment. With this in mind, the third research question asked in this dissertation is:

#### **What would a validity argument look like for the viva?**

Inspired by the validity chain model of Crooks *et al.* (1996) and Messick's treatise (1989) on validation, the argument is to be made that validity provides the starting point and the most important measure of an assessment practice, rather than reliability, fitness for purpose, transparency, accountability and justice (Stobart, 1999). With these points in mind, Part III explores the validity of the viva conceptualised as the social practice of validation, where a validity argument model for the viva is developed (Chapter 6) and applied (Chapter 7).

While Messick is correct, that the validation process must consider not only constructs accompanying empirical data from candidate performances, the social consequences of the assessment and examiner values, his conceptualisation of a unitary judgment linking these is under-theorised. The unitary judgment at stake is the one undertaken by not only those devising or externally assessing the form of assessment, but also those who use it. In other words, firstly, the validity and the

process of validation becomes something determined not in a once and for all manner, but in each and every instance of the assessment. And secondly, as a consequence, the responsibility for validity can no longer be considered the sole responsibility of those devising or externally assessing the assessment, it also becomes a concern for the users of the assessment.

Inspired by Sadler's (1989: 126) concept of tacit and rarely articulated in-the-head standards, I propose a concept of in-the-head normative judgments made by examiners and connect this with their use of extrinsic narratives (drawing upon research literature in the discipline) in order to conceptualise what is going on when examiners make their judgments. My contention is that these judgments (in-the-head and using extrinsic narratives) and the extent to which they take into account social consequences, constructs, values and evidence, make it possible to determine the validity of the viva in each and every instance.

### **Theorising the viva**

In the final chapter (8), the answers to the three research questions (why study the viva, how it is talked into being and can it be valid?) are drawn together to theorise the academic viva in higher education.

The approach in this dissertation has been inspired by Nietzsche, who never sought the single, definitive truth of a phenomenon, in this case the viva as an assessment practice<sup>5</sup>. Having said this, it is not impossible to propose a theory of the viva with the understanding that the theory proposed has more the character of a single research programme among many possible ones. The term research program, Lakatos's phrase (1970: 132-133), entails a hard core of strongly held concepts and assertions, surrounded by a protective belt of less strongly held auxiliary, concepts and assertions. I shall propose a theory of the academic viva as a form of social practice, in which the core contains the concepts of constructs, judgments, social practice and narratology.

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<sup>5</sup> Nietzsche sought to reveal how and under what conditions a phenomena developed, in particular the role played by different groups and their interests.

Where is the concept of power in such a theory? Surely the examiners have power and the candidate is without power? Shouldn't this be a core concept in any theorisation of the viva? As I argued above, power is expressed in the course of the viva as participants, including the examiners and the candidate, struggle for narrative domination. Narratives, I contend, are one of the theory's core assertions. Participants draw upon narratives to legitimate and dominate the flow of conversation in the viva, and they also want the particular narrative they have proposed to achieve the status of master narrative in the face of competing, smaller less dominant narratives. From such a perspective, even grade setting can be understood as the attempt by examiners to appeal to different narratives (e.g. good understanding of the narrative on methodology versus poor understanding of the narrative on pedagogy as a discipline), which when dominant, determines the final grade.

Put simply, 'power is narrative power', and by this I mean the use of narratives to exert and achieve domination. The dominant master narratives are not however, the exclusive property of the examiners. A master narrative can be voiced by the candidate, just as a candidate can dispute the status of a master narrative voiced by an examiner and propose their own master narrative. When 'power is narrative power', the person who occupies the dominant position can change. Power is not an object or something that always follows from the official title of a person, it becomes the property of the narrative and the legitimacy attached to it by participants.

To what extent is such a conceptualisation of power, embedded in narratives, realised? Examiners might argue that they have the opportunity - often taken - to determine the flow of conversation and final grades because of the asymmetry of the examiner-candidate relationship, resting as it does upon institutional arrangements. And yet, the candidate who asks a question rather than listens, disrupting the viva's intrinsic flow, or introduces a rarely voiced but respected extrinsic narrative (e.g. citing research in the field), is he/she they not turning the tables on such examiners? They assume narrative control. If this is the case, then domination doesn't belong to a single person because of their official title (e.g. examiner, professor), it belongs to the points made and defended in the course of the viva. In short, the viva approaches Habermas's (1989: 36) often sought, but

rarely realised ideal of the ‘domination free conversation’, grounded not so much in ‘the authority of the better argument’, but in the authority of the better, master narrative.

## **Part I: Why Study the Viva as a Form of Assessment?**

# Chapter 1

## The Life and Death of the Viva

To be on anew and basking again  
in the panaroma of all the flores of  
speech...in the states of suspensive  
exanimation<sup>6</sup>

*Finnegans Wake*, Joyce

The contemporary viva in higher education, or disputation as it is known in Europe, has its history<sup>7</sup>. This will be considered by exploring its form, beginning with the time of the classical Greeks. Thereafter, the following periods will be discussed: the Greco-Roman, the Middle Ages, the modern period with a focus on the centrality of the form of the viva once found at Oxford and Cambridge, the contemporary professional and academic viva and lastly, post-modern conceptions of the viva. The methodology chosen in this chapter is genealogical, in the spirit of Nietzsche, and as such the question asked is not, ‘what is the viva’, but ‘how and under what conditions have its different forms come into existence, continued to exist or faded away?’ In other words, the goal of this chapter is to investigate the life and death of the viva, and to thereby foreground debate on the following question: should the viva be abolished as a form of assessment?

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<sup>6</sup> Joyce (1992: 143) uses *panaroma* instead of panorama; *exanimation* comes from the Latin *exanimatio* for terror, and the word *exanimation* can also mean loss of consciousness.

<sup>7</sup> A version of this chapter has been published (Dobson, 2007a) in *Sociologisk årbok* (Annual Review of Sociology).



### **Typology or genealogy?**

The viva has existed in a number of different forms. Today it can be found in academic arenas, such as the doctoral examination. In its professional form it can qualify for membership to associations; for example, membership of the Royal College of General Practitioners. In the past, as in the time of the Greeks, it entailed a public disputation on a chosen topic (Lim, 1995).

In this chapter, it is the verbal probing of the understanding and competence of the student in a viva for a professional qualification and their counterpart in the academic disciplines that will be explored. As a consequence, there are two kinds of viva that will not be considered: Firstly, when a public civil servant, such as a social worker, questions a client. This is an examination, but what is examined is not knowledge of a non-personal, academic topic. On the contrary, personal family history is recalled and subjected to questioning.<sup>8</sup> The second type of viva that could have been considered is the one that probes language students and their knowledge and command of their chosen language. Here, language itself or the oral medium is examined and nothing more, as is the case in the academic viva focused upon the submitted dissertation or the professional viva exploring the candidate's practical and theoretical skill.

Joughin (1998) in his review of the literature on the viva, developed a typology, where each piece of research on the topic was scored along the following 6 dimensions: primary content type (e.g. demonstration of recall and understanding), interaction (e.g. the amount of dialogue and response), authenticity (e.g. degree of replication of practice), structure (e.g. extent to which the oral assessment is based upon pre-determined questions), examiners (e.g. who judges the answers – can be examiners, self-assessment or peer assessment) and finally, orality (e.g. if other mediums are also involved, such as a submitted dissertation). Joughin presents a timeless typology of the viva, ignoring the

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<sup>8</sup> This kind of viva falls under the group of oral assessments typical of a number of professions: 'medicine with its clinical assessment, law with its mooting or mock trials, and architecture with its "design juries"' (Joughin, 1998: 367). However, when the client is examined verbally, this is not the same as a viva with the express purpose of subjecting the professional or student in the profession to questions posed by examiners.

influence of historical developments and changing socio-cultural, political and economic conditions. I shall not attempt to develop a similar typology because of its universalistic ambitions.

The strategy adopted in this chapter is more in the spirit of Nietzsche (1969), asking ‘not what is the timeless truth of a phenomenon’, but ‘how and under what conditions does it emerge, gain a form and then potentially lose it?’ Thus, viewed genealogically, in terms of the shifting socio-cultural, political and economic conditions supporting the emergence and development of the academic and professional viva, it is the case that at times, a form of the viva might actually cease to exist and disappear. This was the case with the academic viva, termed disputation, in late Greco-Roman times. The history of the viva can therefore be conceptualised as different forms growing in popularity, entering periods when their use is openly questioned, and followed by a decline (see Table 1 below).

Furthermore, adopting such a genealogical conception of the viva means that long jumps in time between periods might be expected; for example, from the demise of the viva in Greco-Roman times until the Middle Ages. Socio-cultural, political and economic conditions changed before the viva once again came into existence. This means that the kind of history proposed is not evolutionary, if by this it is meant the slow development of the phenomenon in an unbroken, linear manner.

Allowing for periods of growth and decline is important in the sense that the viva is always under the threat of extinction, as other forms of assessment gain in popularity for different reasons. For example, a common argument made against the viva is that it is considered expensive; in terms of cost per candidate, compared with pen and paper examinations. In other words, it is claimed that it is unsuitable for mass forms of examination. However, in some European countries, such as Norway, all students in higher education and high school can expect to sit a viva. In Germany, all undergraduates can expect to take several vivas.

Not only is the viva considered costly, but it is also considered to lack a standardised form, catering as it does to the individual character and responses of

the candidate. This is considered one of the requirements for an assessment form in modern, industrialised society, where large numbers of students are to be examined in a pre-determined and standardised manner. Post-modern conceptions of the viva, instead of apologising for this lack of standardisation, have insisted that this is precisely one of its strengths. The viva is considered suitable for the examination of the local and context specific knowledge of the candidate. Put differently, it is particularly suited to examining the unique ‘syntax’ and content of each candidate’s knowledge.

**Table 1: A genealogy of the different forms of the viva**

<b>Period</b>	<b>Characteristics of the viva</b>	<b>Socio-cultural, political and economic conditions</b>
<b>Classical Greek</b>	In some Greek schools of thought: Dialectical forms of argumentation (syllogism) seeking certain knowledge.	Reserved for philosophers, sons of the wealthy. Sophists rising in importance.
<b>Greco-Roman</b>	Rhetorical use of the viva through clever and convincing argument.	Skill in disputations is taught and practiced in politics, law and public arenas.
<b>End of Roman era</b>	Demise of the viva: less open use of the persuasive speaker.	Rise of the culture of Christianity and the viva is considered a source of political unrest.
<b>Middle Ages</b>	Return of the viva e.g. logic disputations in public.	In formal, institutionalised educational settings.
<b>Modern</b>	Viva faces criticism of low level of standardisation, low level of transparency, but it measures a verbal reasoning (e.g. inductive) and communicative competency not easily measured by other forms of assessment (e.g. written assessment), it can probe <i>why</i> and <i>how</i> understood and not merely <i>what</i>	With industrialisation, increased number of students, costly to administer compared to written examinations; but viva valued for its socio-cultural rite of passage function.
<b>Post-modern</b>	Defence of the viva: as new narrative moves.	Costly and local form of assessment when dependent upon new narrative moves.

It has to be emphasised that this chapter does not therefore, have at its outset a pre-defined, stable understanding of the form and content of the professional and academic viva, nor does it have such a definition as its final goal. Some might regard this as a slack and lazy form of research, but as argued, the goal of this chapter is genealogical and identifying some timeless truth of the phenomenon is not considered desirable.

### **The viva in the time of the Greeks and Greco-Romans**

For Socrates, the viva could involve the questioning of a passerby in the street, a private kind of disputation, or groups of people in more formal settings when the event had the character of a public disputation on a certain topic or issue of contention.

Central to the Greek culture of the viva was the understanding and practice of dialectics. The word used was *dialegein* (Latinised version), meaning not merely to argue or converse, but to argue for a conclusion or establish by argument. Nearly all of Socrates' dialogues are suitable for presenting Socrates's view of the 'question and answer' technique.

In *Meno*, the spoken dialogue between Socrates and Meno, Socrates introduces the understanding of knowledge as recollection from a previous life.<sup>9</sup> This learning from recollection can be understood not as knowledge of the empirical world, dependent upon experience and changing, but as referring to unchanging non-sensible, a priori knowledge.

In the course of the dialogue Socrates poses questions and elicits answers with the intention of initiating a move from ignorance towards opinions. These 'opinions' were beliefs, what he called *doxa*. Repeated questioning converted opinions into knowledge when the person questioned achieved true or constant knowledge of the item under inquiry. The end result was the achievement of episteme i.e. certain knowledge.

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<sup>9</sup> Of course, *Meno*, like many of Socrates thoughts, have reached us as literary works written by Plato. However, this must not detract from how they were written as dialogues between more than one person and can be read aloud to demonstrate this. For instance, Bolter (2001: 104) has regarded them as a hybrid compromise 'between oral and written controlling structures.'

The *Meno* dialogue is to do with learning and the transmission of knowledge. Not the transmission of knowledge between people, but from different levels within the same person. The learning involves learning how to look within oneself and recollect the already known, but not recognised. Despite using questions to first induce a state of confusion and doubt into the person questioned, Socrates regarded the dialogue as an opportunity to ‘carry out together a joint investigation and inquiry’ (*Meno*, 80d). That it is a joint investigation must not be read to mean that the participants are equals in knowledge or experience. Implicit in the view of Socrates, even when he claims his own ignorance, is that he knows and has experienced more than Meno.

Socrates’s standpoint can be summed up by the following quote:

Knowledge will not come from teaching but from questioning. He will recover it for himself’ (*Meno*, 85d).

With the *Meno* spoken dialogue in mind and the way it illustrates this process of moving from opinions to true knowledge, the contemporary viva might also be viewed as the move from ‘not opinions’, but from tacit knowledge to a deeper knowledge of the lines of argument contained in the written work examined. Is the knowledge thus attained of a constant, unvarying character? Will it not change according to the perspective or interests of the reader or person asking the questions? In one sense it is true and legitimated in only the local instance of the viva. But then again, examiners talk of the “red thread” in a piece of work and this might be thought of as an unchanging and re-occurring knowledge. So, it might be possible to find in the written work a kind of constant argument, not unlike the kind of certain knowledge Socrates sought to reveal.

Despite these similarities between contemporary viva and Greek viva, there are some important differences. Firstly, Greek culture did not use the viva as a form of assessment qualifying for entry into different professions or for the award of titles, such as a doctorate. Secondly, contemporary forms of the viva are often based upon the candidate’s own work submitted in textual form. The Greek viva

often lacked such a base. On both of these counts, the content and significance of questions in the contemporary viva will change.

Plato continued to build upon the insights of Socrates in *The Republic* (1955). He stated that pure thought, as episteme, would not be possible if students were 'unable to argue logically' (531) in a 'give and take' manner. It might be thought that Plato was wholeheartedly in favor of youth learning dialectic through public disputation. But, Plato's *Republic* is premised on the view that not all should be allowed to practice dialectic. He reserves training in the dialectic for wealthy youth who have reached the age of 30 years. He lets Socrates say the following:

You must have noticed how young men, after their first taste of public disputation, are always contradicting people just for the fun of it; they imitate those whom they hear cross-examining each other, and themselves cross-examine other people, like puppies who love to pull and tear at anyone within reach (539).

For Aristotle, the dialectic revealed the character of all reasoning. He was inspired by Zeno of Elea, less than by Plato on this point. Aristotle argued in the *Prior Analytics* that reasoning was based upon the syllogism <sup>10</sup>:

An argument in which, certain things having been assumed, something other than these follows of necessity from their truth, without needing any term from outside. (§24, b18-22)

In the *Topics*, Aristotle is clear about the role that can be played by dialectic:

...a method by which we shall be able to reason syllogistically from generally accepted opinions about any problema brought

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<sup>10</sup> He differentiated between the scientific syllogism and the dialectical syllogism and concentrated his argument on the role of dialectic. The scientific syllogism allowed demonstration and was based upon premises that were true and immediate, whereas the dialectical syllogism was based upon premises that were probable, or acceptable, as it is sometimes termed in translations (Smith, 1997: 1). Furthermore, the dialectical syllogism was differentiated from the contentious syllogism, which reasoned from premises that merely seemed probable (or acceptable) or were based upon incorrect reasoning.

forward, and shall ourselves, when under examination avoid self-contradiction. (*Topics*. I:100, a18-21)

Dialectical problems are addressed in such examinations or disputations, and he supplied advice for would-be participants in dialectical disputations:

To defend either a thesis or a definition, you should first work out an attack on it for yourself. For it is clear that it is those things on the basis of which questioners refute the thesis that you should oppose. Avoid defending an unacceptable thesis. For people will think you mean it. (*Topics*, VIII, 160b, 14-23)

The reader is given an indication of how the dialectic was practiced at different venues. Thus, of its purposes he suggested the following: training in disputation, encounters and philosophical science. (*Topics*, I:101, a26-30). The encounters he has in mind are those places where the opinions of the public will be confronted. In other words, in public disputations.

The extent to which Aristotle institutionalised training in dialectics in the Peripatos is impossible to determine. Nevertheless, in the Peripatos he followed Plato's own precedent in the *Parmenides*, of stating antithetical views. The goal was to keep things open through a never-completed questioning. As the Peripatos developed, it held much in common with the doubting Sceptics, and less in common with the more popular Stoics. (Grayeff, 1974: 63-65) This is probably why its influence as a school was limited in ancient Greece.

These early Greeks used the disputation – in the version developed by Socrates, Plato and Aristotle – to delimit their hard won knowledge from those interested in using the disputation for a different goal and a different type of knowledge. The Sophists were not interested in the pursuit and attainment of true knowledge, they developed disputation as a skill schooled in rhetoric. Put simply, the public disputation served different purposes for Greek philosophers and Sophists.

In the method of the Sophists, their use of rhetoric was based upon longer expositions in public lectures (*epideixeis*). As Guthrie (1969: 41) noted, it was

also based upon inviting questions from the audience and not merely upon long speeches on a prepared theme. Secondly, Sophists also took part in contests at Olympian and Pythian games, where rhetoric was used in an agonistic ‘verbal battle’ over prizes (*Protagoras*, 335a).

The Sophists are important in the genealogy of the viva because they suggest precisely a different goal for public disputation – victory, rather than truth. Learning the skill of speaking will become a cornerstone of higher education in antiquity and in the Middle Ages. Isocrates, a Sophist and contemporary of Plato and Aristotle, was instrumental in introducing rhetoric as the crown in education after training in mathematics, literary works and the techniques of disputation and argument.

By the third century B.C., in the words of Knowles (1962: 63) ‘rhetoric had conquered as the sole pursuit in higher education’. This was the period in the Roman Empire when rhetoric was a practice totally in tune with the demands of Roman life. The nobleman had to be a fluent and persuasive speaker in the Senate and as a military commander. Cicero’s books *De Oratore* (1942a, 1942b) and *Orator* (1942) described the basic constituents of rhetorical practice at this time. It was the style of speech, what Aristotle called the ‘speech itself’, that was the key. Put differently, of the following it was the last that was considered most important: what to say, when to say, and how to say it. But unlike Aristotle <sup>11</sup>, Cicero regarded rhetoric in a far more positive light, as he put it in *de Inventione* (1949), it was ‘to persuade by speech’ (§6) and refine the ‘power of oratory’ (§7) in the forum and in the courts. But it is worth noting that even if skill in ‘how to say it’ was important, Cicero was concerned that orators had knowledge of the ‘what to say’ of subjects and of proof through logical argumentation. He made reference to the great practitioners of the past and how they varied proof, delight and exerted influence through their speeches.

Morgan (2001) argued that Roman education lacked formal assessment. But he had to admit that in the schools of rhetoric, the pupil while performing ‘will

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<sup>11</sup> In *The Art of Rhetoric* Aristotle (1991) explored rhetoric and considered it important in practical reasoning. His concept of *phronesis* (Aristotle, 1981) has much in common with rhetoric’s practical reasoning.



depend on his instructor's verdict and will take his approval as a guarantee that he has spoken well'. (Quintilian, quoted by Morgan, 2001: 16) There was therefore assessment in the sense of making a judgment on a candidate's viva. However, it was not a formal assessment, in the sense of an institutionalised examination with shared and standardised rules, including the award of certificates. The socio-cultural conditions ensured a more elitist form of education and had no need for modern forms of institutionalised mass assessment.

### **The death of the viva as public disputation**

At the time of the death of Cicero in 43 B.C. and Caesar in 44 B.C. careers in the military and administration were less open and fluid. There was less use for the persuasive speaker in public, and open debate was no longer a preliminary to all decision making. Eloquence – in the sense of rhetorical skill – 'moved from the forum and the senate to the lecture-hall and the private salon; the set declamation took the place of the speech or the political debate' (Knowles, 1962: 64). Rhetoric continued to be taught in higher education, but it had less relevance to the political and social life of the times.

In Greco-Roman times, the public disputation among philosophers had become less a give and take, where questioner and answerer exchanged positions. For example, Plotinus (205-70 CE), a Platonist, allowed his students to interrupt with questions. But, it was not the more open Socratic question and answer, rather he dealt with questions such that they furthered his teaching on a particular theme. The role of questioner and questioned was fixed. The philosophical disputation therefore had an increasingly different goal in mind, one which was protreptic. It resulted in the instruction and socialisation of less advanced students into a more domesticated or more controlled dialectical way of arguing. Support for such an understanding can be found in Cicero's text, *Tusculan Disputations*. He places the exchange within a teaching session by labeling protagonists A for auditor (pupil) and M for magister (teacher).

Lim argues (1995: 34), that the dialectical questioning of Socrates had always represented a questioning of authority and leading citizens. It was thus considered less desirable by society, and also by leading philosophers, who concerned to

maintain authority and traditions, were keen to adopt the role of philosopher-teacher. Thus, the philosophical disputation, in its original Socratic form, was devalued and the philosopher-teacher evolved into a privileged figure of authority.

Philosophers, rather like Christian leaders, fashioned themselves into holy persons. Porphyry, noted that his teacher Plotinus had experienced divine inspiration and this could not be bettered by techniques or performances of disputation. Lim (1995: 46) has summarised this change in the following way:

Philosophical authority left dialectic and alighted on the person of the philosopher-teacher himself...the philosopher effectively withdrew himself from overt challenges.

As philosophers backed away from public disputations based upon the dialectical form of Socrates, Christians also sought to restrict the occurrence of public disputations. This took time and public debates with Manichean believers in a duality, a god of evil and a god of good, had to be won. The Manicheans were schooled in Aristotelian dialectic and syllogism, asking such questions as 'whence evil?

In some of the surviving accounts of Mani supporters in Gaza, Mesopotamia, Egypt and elsewhere the Mani supporter might face Christians who used a different form of argument: the presence of noble faith after entering a fire (Lim, 1995: 80-81). Illiterate and unlearned audiences found the demonstration by deeds more impressive than the ability to spin arguments.

The dialectical fervor of the Mani attracted the young Augustine (354-430 C. E). As he grew older and became a Christian, he disliked their dialectical disputations and instead favoured calm discussion. In *Contra Fortunatus* (392 C.E), Augustine refused to let his opponent talk in agonistic fashion of his own moral and ascetic virtues. The debate was limited to doctrine alone.

By 527 C.E. there was a law outlawing Manichaeans, it was not any longer an equal contest if Christians met with them for debate. Christians let the authority of their religious leaders ward off invitations to public debate. They referred to

scripture and held this to be beyond dispute in public events. Lim's observation is fitting (1995:108):

Like the classical Greeks, Christians in the later empire discovered that the written word fettered the dynamic logos and the dialectical element of speech. Yet while the Greeks viewed such a constraint negatively, Christians, with their belief in revealed truth and their need to achieve social closure, found in the written word a god-sent gift.

In other words, the religious leaders could use written words to bring about closure.

However, not all Christians were united in late antiquity. In the Anomoean controversy in the late 4<sup>th</sup> century, Eunomius the Cappadocian was charged with turning theology into technologia. By this it was meant he used too much Aristotlian dialectic instead of the Christian preference for plain speech (Neusner and Chilton, 1997). Some of his opponents also used dialectical forms of argumentation, so that what was really at issue was his use of rhetoric. He was considered in this sense, too much of a sophist. A typical question used by Anomoean sympathisers was:

Do you worship what you know or what you do not know?

Christians were keen to adopt an ascetic life style shunning controversy. This entailed a type of strict moral code, a way of life, *paideia*. Ascetic values were seen to be against the dialectical values of Eunomius.

Silence, and an increasingly mystical view of Deity as beyond human grasp were strategies used in response to the dialectical questioning. For example, Christian bishops of Nicaea were able to defeat a dialectical philosopher attacking their preference for hierarchal order by simply using the *simplicitas* of the Christian message.

Foucault (1988) interpreted the rise of the pastoral, as the necessary submission to a religious authority in order to obtain salvation. One had to forget one's own will, either through dramatic means (e.g. a public penitence for sins) or confessional practices (e.g. to a master monk). Thus, with Augustine as an example, it is possible to see how the socio-cultural conditions provided by an insitutionalisation of religious practice, made the once public questioning of others and one's own self more private. The dialectic and its disputation had been a public source of self-formation. Now this project of *bildung* became a more privatised event, a meeting between the individual and their god, with the mediation of a worldly religious authority, such as a priest or master monk who was entrusted with obtaining a confession.

The demise of the public disputation among philosophers and Christians, who themselves adopted a dialectical stance was therefore connected with the desire of philosopher teachers and Christian leaders to avoid a public questioning of their beliefs and knowledge. The role of teacher and Christian leader was to be fixed and pupils/listeners were to accept what they heard.

### **The rebirth of the viva in the Middle Ages**

The privatisation of a once public event reaches into the Middle Ages. Nevertheless, a form of the viva existed in the monasteries and convents. Students had to recite scripture, and the more advanced students were questioned about their understanding of the texts. Alongside this development, another takes place in the late Middle Ages. The rise of the university, as a socio-cultural and political event was important in the revival of the viva. At the medieval university of Paris in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, students were apprenticed to a master, and when he regarded the students as ready they took a public viva if they desired to receive a licence to teach. Wilbrink (1997: 35) noted:

What really was innovative and characteristic of the universities, as new institutions, was the examination by a committee of masters.

This meant that the individual master became dependent upon his examining colleagues. Thus, horizontally, masters recognising masters, but also in a

hierarchical sense, whereby no master without his master (*nullus assumi debet in magistrum, qui sub magistro non fuerit discipulus*)<sup>12</sup> in order to secure the reproduction of the magistrature.

In the context of the viva the important point was the connection created between teaching and formal examinations. Wilbrink (1997) discounts the view that the Chinese were the inspiration for university examinations in Europe. Their written examinations did not particularly resemble their European counterparts. Another more probable explanation is that the idea came from the Muslim world. Already in the 11<sup>th</sup> century the disputation was an important instrument in the development of Muslim law.

Before the age of experimental science, the disputation 'was the only method to develop new knowledge, and to critically analyse newly discovered or translated theories' (Wilbrink, 1997: 36). Of course, this did not apply to all disputations. As Perreiah (1984: 94) has noted, the disputation was a compulsory daily activity among students attending Oxford and Padua in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. Such daily disputations had a didactic goal. But, on occasions a particular disputation was a major event and all other activities in the university were cancelled.

Nordkvelle (2003: 320) is surely correct to note the importance of new didactic advances based upon the innovations of Hugo St. Victor (1097-1141) and Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274). They brought a greater emphasis on monological forms of teaching. However, other events were also important:

It was not until the Italian humanists 'rediscovered' the dialogue in the 15<sup>th</sup> century that it regained its previous status, and this time on a fundamental rhetorical ground.

Politeness and amicable conversation were considered essential skills in expanding international economy, and the art of rhetoric was an essential skill in

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<sup>12</sup> Nothing is taken from the master, if not under the master has been the apprentice. Cited by Bourdieu (1996a: 95). In other words, in gaining the status of master, the candidate was dependent on the master. This was a vertical relation.

this respect. Lost classical works, Quintilian's *Institutio Oratoria* and Cicero's *De Oratore* were hunted down.

These economic (trade) and cultural factors (discovery and interest in classical texts on rhetoric, as well as didactic advances) had consequences for the disputation; it retained its central importance in university education until modern times. But, its position must not be over-estimated. Recruitment to positions of influence in government and trade were not dependent upon educational qualifications. The culture of the meritocracy had yet to arrive.

### **The viva in modern times**

With modern industrial society, the advent of mass education created the need to break with pre-modern ascribed and informal qualifications for occupational positions in society. Broadfoot (1996: 67, 86) argues that this is connected with a) how 'instrumental and social functions are now organised on the basis of the individual', b) society becomes more rational and c), there is a contradiction as societies desire to increase social integration, at the same time maintaining inequality<sup>13</sup>. With this socio-economic background the love affair with the written examination began. How did the viva fair?

According to Broadfoot's modernity thesis, the demise of the viva would be predicted and confirmed when other more rational and socially integrative (i.e. less elitist) forms of assessment are adopted. As a way of exploring this thesis let us look at the case of the Oxbridge universities in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. This is a period when precisely modern mass forms of assessment were ascendant. The presentation and analysis that follows in this section will not be broadened to consider the situation in Germany, for example, with its *disputation* (defending the dissertation) and *Rigorosum* (defending the dissertation and the discipline). That this is not attempted, inevitably makes the presentation Anglo-centric.

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<sup>13</sup> Broadfoot is a spokeswoman against the 'myth of measurement' thesis: 'The continually increasing significance of educational assessment at all levels of the education system may be traced to a belief in the possibility of applying a scientific technology to the measurement of human achievement and even underlying ability...such measures can never be objective since they are inevitably limited by the social nature of the assessment situation and the values and culture which overlay the interpretation of the quality of a given performance. (2007: 28)' The final

However, the English case is worthy of discussion, precisely because it reveals the conditions for the demise of the viva and this is not the case in German higher education, where the viva still thrives (Kehm, 2001).

In Cambridge and Oxford in the 1600s, all examinations were oral and in Latin. They were public events when the BA candidates were challenged by senior college members. By 1700 records show that some candidates at Cambridge were examined by written examination; it provided time to 'weigh and compare the suitable merits of the young men with suitable deliberation' (Monk, quoted in Stray, 2001: 36). There were other reasons for the shift: at Cambridge, the building used for disputations was commandeered as part of the large library, and examiners between 1710-30 had no place to conduct public orals. Secondly, the opportunity to rank students individually, rather than in assigning students to broad classes on the basis of performance in oral examinations was made possible with the written examination. Thirdly, the written examination was a silent and quick way of examining. This contrasted with the public verbal battles of the public disputation.

As a consequence of this shift in the 1700s, increasing numbers of students at Cambridge sat written examinations in a number of subjects; in 1722 questions were dictated to students for a written answer; from 1790 some papers were printed, and students could take them away to window seats; in 1828 all papers were printed and examiners had only a limited opportunity to examine orally. In the Arts, the oral ceased in 1839, but was retained until 1858 in Law, Divinity and Physics. However, some colleges at Cambridge resisted in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, such as St. John's College, and provided evidence of the viva examination. In other words, there was a certain politics between colleges, with the viva surviving in some isolated cases, but only for a period of time. This despite the fact that it was felt that standard answers were handed down from one under-graduate generation to the next before they sat their viva; making the viva highly predictable and not a test of the unique understanding of each candidate.

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phrases betray her allegiance to the argument proposed by Messick (1989), about including the social consequences and values of a test in an assessment of its validity.

The position at Oxford was different. While written examinations were introduced in the 1820s, with the increased pressure of rising matriculation of students, a pressure also felt at Cambridge, the *viva voce* was still an important element in the examination of many subjects. Finalists in 1900 were still liable to be examined in every subject except mathematics. Stray (2001) argues that the main reason for the difference was the stronger prominence of classics and theology at Oxford; compared with mathematical and Newtonian materialism found at Cambridge. The latter were more interested in measuring individual competence through written examinations. For Oxford, the social interaction found in the viva was more important; it ‘reflected a concern with quality rather than quantity’ (Stray, 2001: 44). As Whewell remarked to a Royal Commission in 1853:

Viva voce examination catches out the crammer. It measures quality and competency, while written papers produce classification. (Whewell, quoted in Stray, 2001: 46)

In sum, the increased desire to competitively measure and individually rank students supports the analysis of Broadfoot, and how the viva declined at Cambridge. Increased student numbers at Cambridge in the 1820s, along with changing content (to more quantifiable and measurable questions, inspired by the Newtonian materialism) also supported the move away from the viva. Oxford on the other hand, experienced increasing student numbers and yet with a socio-cultural foundation in theology and classics, the viva survived.

### **The contemporary debate on the viva**

The argument of the previous section, focused on the birth of modern mass assessment practices, and how the viva managed to survive in some, but not all institutions. This section is still within the broad framework of modern assessment practices, but a jump is made from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century at Oxford University to the contemporary situation. In the intervening period, the ‘love affair with the written examination’ has continued unabated (Gordon Stobart, personal communication, 16.12.04). In the face of this position of dominance, it is therefore important to look at the form of the viva today and the socio-cultural, economic and political conditions that continue to support its existence. Attention



will be focused on two cases: first, the doctoral academic viva in the UK; a potentially useful case for international comparisons, although I critique this assertion in Chapter 2. Second, the viva held by different professional bodies, in particular those held in the medicine.

Concern at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century has been raised about the lack of transparency in the UK doctoral academic viva. It has been a private examination not open to public scrutiny. In only one institution cited by Jackson and Tinkler (2000: 47) are other academics in the university allowed to attend. Transparency is also limited by the lack of universal standards and criteria. Nevertheless, participants in a series of seminars throughout the UK on doctoral research degrees 'agreed that criteria might be difficult to standardise across higher education institutions and that in any case such standardisation would not be desirable' (Powell and Mc Cauley, 2002: 107). In other words, a resistance to modern pressures of standardisation exists among academics.

This does not mean however, that standards do not exist within each discipline. Communities of academics establish less explicit and formal standards of entry to their guilds when examining:

The utilisation of external examiners is the method employed for attempting to obtain a degree of inter-institutional consistency in terms of standards. (Jackson and Tinkler, 2000: 42)

An issue raised by several researchers (e.g. Morley, Leonard and David, 2002, Tinkler and Jackson, 2000; Jackson and Tinkler, 2001) was the lack of clarity about what the doctoral viva was assessing. Powell and Mc Cauley (2002: 106) noted:

It was generally agreed that it is more than the written that is examined. It should be the case that the key skills, reflected by the work, are being judged and therefore the student himself/herself is the real point of scrutiny. Examiners should be asking themselves – has this student integrated key skills and understanding?

However, they also note that the submitted dissertation was ‘prioritised’ as the medium for assessment. This suggests on the one hand, that there was a limited desire to measure competence and soft skills suited to the demands of the labour market. On the other hand, the arrival of professional PhDs indicates the opposite, a willingness to connect the skills of the practitioner with a doctoral level of reflection and theorisation (Scott *et al.*, 2004; Winter *et al.*, 2000).

To summarise, there are over 100,000 doctoral students in UK universities (Morley *et al.*, 2002: 264), as such the decidedly modern term ‘massification’ is appropriate. And yet, standardisation across disciplines has been resisted, transparency is low and a closer connection to skills in fields of practice are limited to the professional PhD. Moreover, some researchers have voiced the view that the ‘chummy’ or ‘hostile’ behaviour of examiners can lead to some candidates having a negative experience of the viva. (Hartley and Fox, 2002; Hartley and Jory, 2000; Wallace and Marsh, 2001: 47) In Germany in the 1970s the oral examination was criticised along these lines, it threatened ‘to degenerate into a sadistic tribunal’. (Wagner quoted in Kehm, 2001: 29)

It seems therefore that the reason for the continued existence of the doctoral viva seems to rest with the socio-cultural traditions of the academy as it secures the social integration of members to the ‘guild’, and at the same time excludes those considered unworthy. The viva is therefore a rite of passage resulting in inclusion or exclusion.

What of the student professional taking a viva as part of their qualification? Have the same issues been raised for debate?

A debate took place in the 60s and 70s in the USA about the comparability of examiners in orals held for medical students. Some medical boards abandoned the oral as early as 1963 (Muzzin and Hart, 1985). Researchers (Levine and McGuire, 1970: 66) found a low rater agreement on candidates; although statistical models, such as the Rasch model, Spearman-Brown correction, structured questions or paired examiners, have since been used to calibrate for examiner leniency/severity and counter the *halo effect* (rating a candidate high in all areas, if scored well in one) (Hill, 1984; Lunz and Stahl, 1993; Yang and Laube, 1983).

The debate on the internal validity of the viva is not a new debate. Hartog and Rhodes (1936: 173) report a small-scale test of inter-examiner reliability (16 in the sample) and reveal that there were 'no cases of complete agreement in the marks assigned' by two boards examining the same candidates on the same days. Barnes and Pressey (1929) in their experimental approach with post-graduate psychology students acting as oral examiners charged that the examiners could not examine in a consistent manner. Nevertheless, the viva was still considered important by them because it provided examiners with the opportunity for a 'group discussion of a candidate'.

Debate among researchers and examining bodies has also considered the relationship between the written and the oral, not as two components of the same examination, but as two separate examinations. Carter (1962: 153) concluded from his survey of 250 anesthesiology students that with a 'low correlation with the written examination, the oral examination may have a unique function'. Holloway *et al.* (1967: 231) suggested that this might be due to the personality of the candidate, whether anxious or not, and how it influenced the final mark:

Candidates who are less anxious (whether they show it or not) should perform better in the rather frightening situation of confronting their examiner face-to-face.

The most statistically sophisticated research on these issues was carried out by Levine and McGuire (1970) who followed 748 medical students. They found that the oral was particularly valid in terms of the constructs required for communication and certain kinds of cognitive thought: inductive and deductive reasoning, arriving at inferences and problem solving. But, multiple choice examination was superior when it came to the construct of recall of information, and written examinations were as good when it came to the construct of interpretation. An alternative interpretation rarely explored, might be that the viva examination measures the same dimensions of competence as the written examination, but unreliably (Muzzin and Hart, 1985: 82).

The research by Roberts *et al.* (2000) has looked in detail into the kinds of communicative competence, what they term discourse competence, used by both

examiners and students in viva that determine entry to the Royal College of Medical Practitioners. In their published research on 24 vivas they noted the parallels between the discourses found in the viva and those used by doctors when practicing their profession. They found that the vivas observed were a mixture of the personal discourse of the candidates and examiners, the professional discourse (accounting for what and how things are done, composed of ‘the discourse of shared ways of knowing and seeing that characterise the community of medical practitioners’) and an institutional discourse based upon a reflective answer to ‘why’ kind of questions. Candidates from certain ethnic backgrounds were more likely to answer in the wrong kind of discourse to the one desired by the questioners (for more critical comments on the research of Roberts *et al.* see Chapter 2 of this dissertation).

### **The post-modern viva**

There are no post-modern conceptions of the viva in existing literature. Post-modern conceptions of assessment do however exist. The most interesting contribution to date has been made by Rømer (2003).<sup>14</sup>

He bases his argument on Lyotard and Wittgenstein, and their view that knowledge and its acquisition is an initiation into the structure of the local, language games and narratives of the particular discipline. Knowledge is a form of rule-following. But it is more than this. Knowledge is always open to a re-reading when communicated and learnt by the student. This is the post-modern

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<sup>14</sup> Torrance (2000) provides an over-view of the post-modern as a new service based, societal form replacing mass, industrial production and characteristic of modernity. Thereafter, he elaborates on Foucault ( - understanding examinations as a form of accepted self-discipline), Lyotard ( - as a spokesman for local knowledge that is pragmatic and useful) and Baudrillard ( - indicating how the rhetoric of raising standards is posited on the premise of an underlying reality that cannot be confirmed). Towards the close of the essay he indicates how the post-modern might be used to support a more differentiated and less universal form of assessment. His verdict, which has little to do with his previous over-view of post-modernism is the following:

Thus assessment should focus on identifying *what* pupils think is a reasonable answer in a particular context, but also *why* they think this – what are their criteria for response, and what do they think of the teacher/examiner’s assumptions? (Torrance, 2000: 186)

Torrance says that post-modern views of society and also assessment are connected with a ‘lack of faith in what has been termed the “modernist” project of rational scientific progress and human emancipation’ (p173), but he does not seem to be fully committed to the post-modern project. By the end of his essay, he seems to have lost faith in the post-modern.

view that knowledge is an event that is continually re-constructed and re-interpreted in and through new narrative moves to suit the needs of the situation.

His view is that learning and the assessment of learning should be regarded as both the acquisition/assessment of knowledge in its local context ( - structure), and also the new meanings this entails on the part of the teacher and the student ( - the event). This means that previously accepted knowledge – the canon – is questioned in each discipline. For Rømer (2003: 319), such a bridging of structure and event can be the source of ‘a post-modern *bildung*’.

Questioning the accepted, in Rømer’s opinion, encourages reflective judgment. It is the movement in and out of traditions of knowledge in the discipline. He claims a wide use for this post-modern view of knowledge and its assessment:

This is the process of the new move, not only within a single text, but also in the perspective of lifelong learning, that is, the gradual re-organisation of the existing traditions with the intention of putting an “accent” on the whole profession or form of life...This is a postmodern interpretation of the concept of Bildung because structure and events collapse into a new creation of Man. (Rømer, 2003: 322)

Rømer’s proposal for a post-modern form of learning and assessment must face a counter-argument questioning the novelty of the post-modern situation and its belief in the creation of new knowledge: knowledge in its transmission and assessment is in many cases a form of re-interpretation of traditions by teachers and students, such that no new knowledge is created.

In professional and under-graduate vivas for example, it might be expected that the recall and re-interpretation of knowledge is the goal, rather than new moves. However, on approaching the doctorate, the creation and assessment of ‘new’ knowledge does gain an explicit formulation. Take for example the following two extracts from doctoral guidelines:



Form a distinct contribution to the knowledge of the subject and afford evidence of originality of new facts and/or by the exercise of independent critical power (London University, Regulations for the degrees of M.Phil and PhD, §6.1.2,b).

In the evaluation of the dissertation, special consideration should be given to whether the dissertation is an independent and comprehensive scientific piece of work of high academic standard with regard to formulation of problems, methodological, theoretical and empirical basis, documentation... The dissertation shall contribute new knowledge to the discipline and be of an academic standard appropriate for publication as part of the scientific literature in the field (*Guidelines for Norwegian doctorates*, 1997).

Such claims for doctoral originality provide support for a post-modern conception of assessment.

However, the burden of originality can be heavy and as Back (2007: 180) has contended on the basis of examining about 50 PhDs, ‘few – if any – theses are completely original... ideas are borrowed and recombined.’<sup>15</sup> In line with this view Baudrillard (1988) believed that the post-modern entailed the distortion of social relations between people, such that they were trapped in a solidified, stagnating, sign mediated reality, incapable of connecting with reality and producing original knowledge. Not all would agree with his view of the post-modern, and persist instead in supporting Rømer’s view of the post-modern event, opening for new, innovative moves and connections.

Thus, paralleling the views of Back and Baudrillard, not all would agree that the doctoral viva is a site for original performances and work. Doctoral vivas involve standard, in the sense of predictable, questions on methodology, findings, assumptions and understanding of the wider discipline in which the candidate is

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<sup>15</sup> Back (2007: 180) goes on to say the following, to somewhat contradict his earlier point: ‘The novelty is the combination, the particular insights and the counter-intuitive nature of the things that people say when we listen to them.’

examined. So, the candidate can second guess the content of many of the questions and positions they will be called upon to defend. This is the kind of argument made by Trafford and Leshem (2002, 2002a). On the other hand, in the spirit of Rømer (2003), the doctoral viva is based upon the candidate's dissertation, which should advance the understanding of its subject and provide evidence of 'a distinct contribution to the knowledge of the subject'. Two opposing post-modern views are therefore possible: either, that the doctoral viva ensures the presence of original instances of the new, or the opposite, that they are strangled and refused.

It is arguably the case that both post-modern positions have some force, since the viva is characterised by both the opportunity to offer new narrative moves, and at the same time it is from within a frame that structures and limits these opportunities, so that questions and responses can be predicted in advance. The former approximates Rømer's view of the post-modern as an event, while the latter approximates the Back and Baudrillard approach to the post-modern above. The latter structural perspective might also be conceptualised in a Foucaultian interpretation of the viva as a controlled and disciplined discourse.

Rømer asserts, as noted above, that the bridging of event and structure in post-modern assessment and learning brings about *bildung*. The kind of self-formation he has in mind has its roots in classic German, humanist conceptions of self-formation through a mediation and engagement with texts and works of art. In the context of the viva, *bildung* is realised by a shared verbal, critical reflection on a text. The text is the submitted dissertation. The critical reflection entails participants understanding the many different possible voices and narratives in the text. This is in line with the attention paid by post-modern theorists to the polyphonic character of texts (Bakhtin, 1984; Dyste, 2003) and narratives without an identifiable beginning, middle and end (Boje, 2001).

This means that not only is the viva characterised by the narratives it reveals, in terms of its character as an event and structure, but also by the opportunities it provides for *bildung*. I choose not to devote further attention to self-formation through *bildung* later in the dissertation. This is because it is notoriously hard to conceptualise *bildung* in a systematic and operational manner, possibly because of

its association with aesthetic experience, possibly because it resembles conceptions of enhanced self-esteem and self-confidence<sup>16 17</sup>. It is also hard to research *bildung* in the viva, if by *bildung* it is meant not merely the shared identification of different possible voices and narratives, but the role of comments given by examiners. These comments may exert a formative influence on the candidate, but it is hard to know a) if this influence will be immediate, or some time in the distant future, and b) how can this influence be identified/measured and traced back to precisely the comments of examiners and not some other intervening factor or group of factors.

The diagram below summarises the different post-modern positions, which swing between innovation (/event) and predictability (/structure):

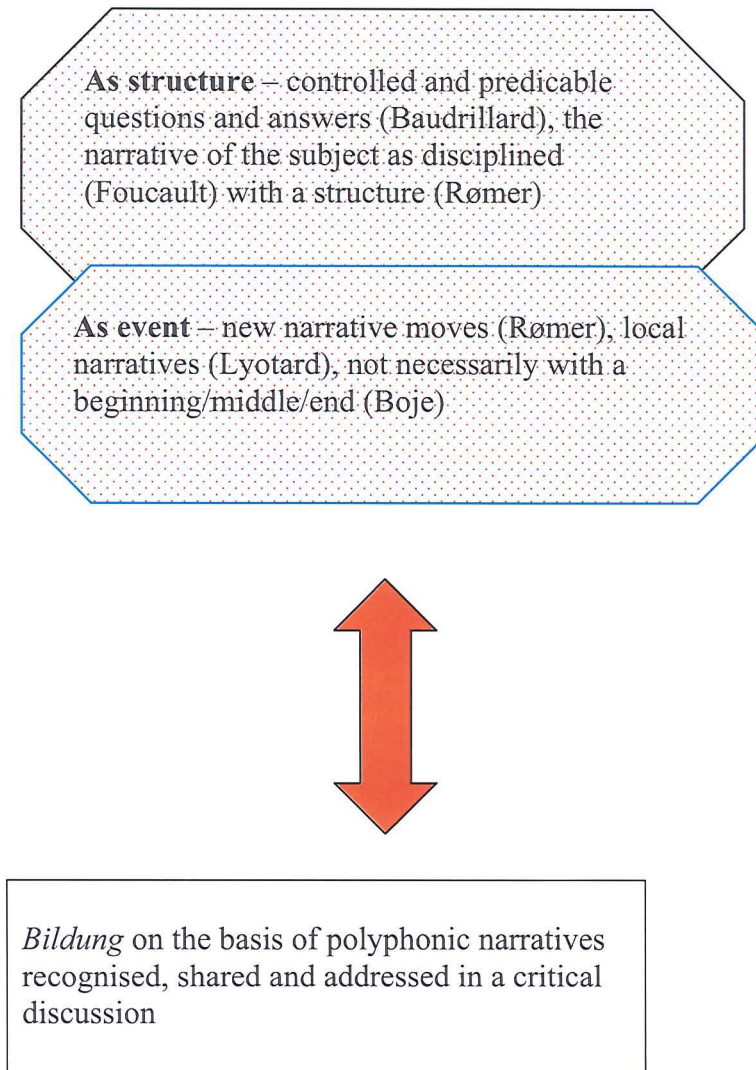
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<sup>16</sup> Self-confidence is a central component in the Scottish policy of 'Assessment is for Learning' in Primary and secondary schooling.

<sup>17</sup> While I have much sympathy for Eisner's argument about the need to understand the role and assessment of expressive learning objectives (as a potential measure of *bildung*) in opposition to their instructional counterpart, they are similarly hard to pin down when connected to the experience of the candidate, as an indicator of the 'evocative rather than prescriptive' (Eisner, 1985: 55).



**Diagram: the viva as a post-modern form of assessment.**



**Foregrounding debate on the future of the academic and professional viva**

The argument of this chapter has been that different forms of academic and professional viva have been supported by various socio-cultural, political and economic conditions. On occasions, a certain form of viva reached its peak only to disappear when the conditions changed. This was the case with the rise of the socio-culture of Christianity. The viva has survived in modern times, despite the 'love affair with written' forms of assessment. It is considered important in forms of professional certification, such as in medicine, where the candidate's ability to communicate in a verbal manner using particular forms of cognitive reasoning can be assessed. Post-modern conceptions of the viva are also possible, when the

emphasis is upon new narrative moves, but a tension exists in a definition of the post-modern viva as precisely the opposite, as a resistance to the new and original.

It might be argued that contemporary forms of the viva, for example in the case of the academic PhD viva, entail the kind of syllogism and dialectical argument found in Greek forms of disputation. However, while this might be the case, my argument has been that the socio-cultural, economic and political conditions supporting the viva of that time and today are different. For example, the PhD viva is part of an institutionalised educational assessment, while the viva in the time of the Greeks lacked such a formalisation. On the one hand, the parallels are therefore limited. On the other hand, this chapter has shown some of the multiple forms of academic and professional viva from the time of the Greeks to the present day. This is important because it suggests that present forms of the viva can be potentially different and draw upon earlier experiences, if appropriate conditions providing support also exist.

There is a danger that my genealogical approach will be interpreted in a strictly determinist manner, such that the socio-cultural, political and economic conditions are seen to determine the form of the viva and prohibit all opportunities for new forms of viva arising on the basis of the actions of individuals. While, the argument presented has been rooted in the role of such conditions, individuals have played an important role. For example: Cicero has been important not only in the time when he lived, but also when his works were rediscovered in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. The doctoral viva, to take an example, is also predicated on the possibility of new narrative moves by individuals in the creation of knowledge.

To conclude, there are no eternally true forms of the viva, nor are there universal conditions that ensure its survival. Typologies, such as the one proposed by Joughin (1998) risk focusing on stable conditions and forms as if they were fixed and unchanging. My preference, as argued in this chapter is for a more open view; with the life and death of the viva regarded as a relation in flux. Moreover, as a logical consequence of this genealogical argument, no universal definition and no single set of arguments can be found to legitimate the survival of current social practices of the viva in a once and for all, timeless manner.

## Chapter 2

### The Under-theorisation of the Viva

For me, words have a charge.  
I find myself incapable of  
escaping the bite of the word,  
the vertigo of a question mark.

*Peau, Noire, Masques Blancs*, Fanon

With research on the Scandinavian viva largely non-existent, insight into current practices must be sought elsewhere. This chapter critiques UK research on doctoral and professional post-graduate vivas. Two lines of argument are explored: firstly, that research into the doctoral viva is under-theorised. With respect to the professional viva, while there is some theorisation, few alternatives are discussed to critically evaluate these theories. Secondly, the argument made is that the methodological approach adopted in the research of the doctoral viva has been predominantly based upon interviews, questionnaires and the analysis of policy documents. As such there has been a lack of insight derived from qualitative, ethnographic research focusing on what is actually going on in the viva, whereas by contrast the methodological approach for research into the professional viva has been more ethnographic and less policy based.

If we look at a recent book on assessment in Norway, *Vurdering og Læring* (Assessment and Learning) by Dale and Wærness (2006), there is little mention of the viva with the exception of two remarks: on how Michael Young's (1971) book *Knowledge and Control* was positively received in Norway with its emphasis on

oral presentation and group work, and secondly, where they suggest (p218-222) the importance of ‘genuine and technical dialogues’ about assessment between teacher and pupil. In the work of Kvale (1993, 1996, 2000) we find some reflections on his own experiences as an examiner of doctoral candidates in Scandinavia, where he argued in critical fashion that the viva was more to do with a certification of students and a certification of knowledge. A report by the Norwegian Research Council (2002: 108, 115) limited its proposals for reform of the doctoral viva to letting the candidate present their own thesis in the public *disputas*, instead of letting an opponent run through its main arguments. Vislie (2002) in an assessment of Norwegian doctoral programs, identified a low completion rate as a problem, but the viva is not mentioned.

There is therefore, little evidence of either systematic quantitative or qualitative research on the doctoral viva in Scandinavia. This has not stopped English language researchers looking to the Scandinavian viva. Tinkler and Jackson (2001), like other researchers (Murray, 2003; Morely *et al.*, 2002), have noted that the academic doctoral viva is more a public event in other countries, such as the Netherlands and Norway. But, they do not comment on the considerable expense of the public event, and how in Norway, for example, the event is more of a ceremony than a high stake event because the candidate is not allowed to sit the viva until their dissertation has been approved by a board of examiners at least 6 weeks prior to the planned viva.

On the basis of these deficiencies in Scandinavian research, this chapter explores UK research into the doctoral viva and professional viva.

### **The researcher’s frame**

Inspired by Goffman’s (1974) conception of *frame analysis*, research into the doctoral viva and professional viva can be understood as two research frames that describe and account for the ‘organisation of experience’ (p13). A frame indicates the ‘sense of what is going on’ (p10) in the activity, understood in terms of the ‘meanings’ given by researchers to the activity under consideration. To use an analogy, the frame is a snap shot that puts spatial, temporal and conceptual boundaries around activity. Accordingly, a frame in my usage refers to the

researcher's definition and assignment of meaning to the viva, which is itself a framed activity, including other frames of activity e.g. the examiner's meeting beforehand and the student's writing of the dissertation, along with frames understanding the consequences of activity after the viva. The focus of this chapter is upon the frame of meanings given to the viva by researchers; and it is to be expected that a certain level of disagreement will exist between researchers, in terms of their theoretical and methodological approaches. The data they use is as follows: for the doctoral viva: pre-dominantly questionnaires and interviews, along with policy documents, while for the professional viva it is ethnographic observation.

The term 'frame' has its parallels. Lakatos (1970) talked of research programs that directed the endeavours of researchers and Bourdieu (1996) developed a concept of fields to account for the social production and reproduction of different institutionalised activities. Common to all these approaches is the focus on the social production and assignment of meaning to activities, such that participants share a conceptual 'frame of reference'. Firstly, these writers anticipate my concept of social practice, which is developed in Chapters 3 and 4 in order to understand not the researcher's frame, but what is going on in the viva itself. Secondly, whilst frames (fields, research programs and social practices) rest upon and at the same time constitute sets of norms, this should not obscure the manner in which they can be disputed. Thus, the argument of this chapter can be read as not only a presentation of researcher frames in two types of viva, but also a critique.

### **The professional viva**

The professional viva can be found in education providing a form of certification for the professions of architect, artist and doctor. I select research in the last mentioned because it highlights a number of issues that contrast with those found in the frame for the doctoral viva. Memon *et al.* 2008 provide an overview of research into the oral post-graduate medical examination, and identify inter-examiner reliability as central concerns, along with what I would call communicative ability. With the last in mind I select for further discussion the work of Roberts *et al.* (2000), who were referred to in Chapter 1. They developed

a socio-linguistic and ethnographic frame to investigate a sample of 24 vivas taken by qualified doctors wishing to gain entry to the Royal College of General Practitioners. Separate written exams were also taken as part of the examination. They additionally undertook 14 interviews of candidates with ethnic backgrounds after the event, and used 11 training videotapes of vivas.

Four things can be noted from this research frame. Firstly, the research was theoretically underpinned by reference to Goffman's (1981) work on the joint construction of interaction by participants and Gumperz's work on discourse strategies (1982). Their more general view was that the viva revealed the construction of knowledge and its legitimation drew upon Kvale's (1993) theoretical constructivism. The point is that their research was theoretically elaborated, such that it is possible to theorise and reflect upon the 'sense of what is happening' in terms of the socio-cultural background of the participants.

Secondly, their research frame was ethnographic where the moves and the strategies of all the participants were explored. The predictability of the examiner's moves – through questions – was increased because examiners used a checklist of topics from which the student had to answer satisfactorily. The training videos were used to supplement the data collected through observation. The check-list, videos and observation increased the level of transparency of what was going on to non-participants.

The third point to note is that this research frame made recommendations that examiners be given special 'sensitising' about issues related to examining candidates from non-English speaking countries. However, this was hardly policy advice grounded in a detailed discussion of different policy options, their implementation and the question of the viability of the viva.

Fourthly, even though research exists on experiences of the medical viva in countries such as the USA (see Chapter 1), there was no mention of it in this frame.

In summary, the frame for research into the professional viva is strong on its theoretical grounding and methodological approach, but relatively weak in terms

of policy-based implications and the role of international comparisons.

### **The academic doctoral viva**

The frame for research into the academic viva in the UK draws upon two groups of doctoral viva: those in the social sciences and those in the natural sciences. Examples of research in this frame include: Delamont *et al.* (1998), Delamont (2000), Hartley and Fox (2002), Hartley and Jory (2000), Morley *et al.* (2002), Murray (2003), Park (2003), Wallace and Marsh (2001). Two further examples are selected for discussion because they highlight the main issues and approaches evident in this research frame.

The first example is based upon the research of Jackson and Tinkler on the viva. They draw upon the same data set in their publications: a sample of 20 UK universities were questioned on their policy with respect to the viva, and secondly, questionnaires were sent to 54 external examiners, 46 internal examiners, 42 supervisors and 88 candidates. The candidates had already taken their viva. The questionnaires looked at how examiners were selected, the viva procedure, perceptions of the viva and its purpose. While the authors were interested in what took place in the viva, the title of their paper (2001), '*Back to Basics: a Consideration of the Purposes of the PhD Viva*' indicated a greater interest in 'why'.

Their findings were that the policy documents indicated that the site for decision-making on the candidate was generally the dissertation and report made by examiners prior to the viva. The viva was important for borderline cases. In 40% of institutions the candidate could not be failed on the basis of performance in the viva. Examiners voiced the view that the viva provided candidates with the opportunity to 'discuss and develop ideas with an expert in the field...an opportunity to receive guidance on the publication of their thesis' (ibid. 2001: 360). Other arguments given were that the viva allowed authenticity to be checked and that the candidate could defend his or her thesis. A small percentage mentioned that the viva tested oral skills, and only 6% of respondents considered the viva totally redundant. Candidates agreed with the view that the viva checked what they knew and added that in some cases it subjected them 'to the most

unnecessary form of misery and humiliation possible' (ibid. 2001: 362).

They also noted that the viva could discourage even successful candidates from pursuing an academic career. This has been an issue of contention in the frame (Hartley and Fox, 2002; Wallace and Marsh, 2001), although there has been no agreement that the behaviour of the examiners is the key independent variable. However, the quality of the thesis has been raised as a factor, as well as the role of the supervisor.

With respect to methodology in the research frame, a number of things must be noted. One data source was policy documents, and it was not always clear if the directives contained in the policy had been implemented, either successfully or otherwise. Secondly, like much of the research in this frame, they made use of questionnaires, often sent to respondents in the post and not administered face-to-face as interviews. The important thing about these questionnaires is that they were administered after the event. It is not possible to confirm if the answers given reflected the actual conduct of the viva. Put simply, the data was post facto.

With respect to the theoretical underpinnings of their research frame, the authors were silent. To gain a better sense of their theoretical standpoint, it is necessary to look at a chapter they contributed to a book on higher education and its communities. In their chapter, Jackson and Tinkler (2000) made reference to the same data set and argued that the viva functioned as a gatekeeper mechanism to the academic community, supporting and demarcating its boundaries. In discussing the role of the gatekeeper the reader might have expected a theoretical discussion with reference to functionalism and social integration into communities (Bourdieu, 1996; Delamont *et al.*, 2000). As no such discussion is forthcoming, the reader can only conclude that it remains an unexplored possibility.

In another piece of published research, Tinkler and Jackson (2000) commented upon the perceived and stipulated independence of examiners, as they sought to ensure fair examinations and the generation of common academic standards between institutions (ibid. 2000: 171-172, 174). The reader might have expected a theory accounting for the interaction of examiners and how this influenced both



their opinions and behaviour as examiners. Once again, no such theory is provided.

To summarise, Tinkler and Jackson's frame is strong on the policy implications of their research, and some limited remarks on international practice are evident. However, the frame remains under-theorised and a question mark can be placed on the soundness of the empirical findings because informants were questioned after the viva and not observed. Put simply, there might be a significant lacuna in the data they collected on the viva.

Jackson and Tinkler (2001: 365) conclude one of their papers with the following:

Questionnaire data provides a useful framework for this exploration, but more qualitative research is required to further explore and explain the findings.

This is echoed in much of the research in the frame. Hartley and Jory (2000) note that questionnaire data tends to lack the rich description and feel for respondents gained from more qualitative data. Murray (2003: 147) suggests that too little is known of 'how important the student's performance on the day is to the outcome'. The general view is that more observation of the actual viva is necessary, and that this will be difficult to achieve as long as research access to the viva is limited.

However, two researchers are an exception in the research into the academic doctoral viva. They adopted an ethnographic approach, rather than one that was interview/policy based. Trafford and Leshem (2002) gathered data on 25 doctoral vivas across several disciplines; including 12 education vivas and 5 vivas in the bio-sciences or applied sciences. They were present as examiners, supervisors or as the independent chair. They noted the questions asked and grouped them in clusters, which were identified in the different vivas. They claimed that their research was 'ethnographic as it sought to understand and then explain the realities that a small number of people experienced within a special setting'.

While their research might have had the trappings of ethnographic research – with observation and participant observation as the main source of data and a focus on

interaction rituals – the fact that they limited their data to the questions asked, without noting the answers from respondents, means that it is scarcely capable of explaining what took place. There are therefore significant limitations to the methodology supporting their research frame. Moreover, as I shall argue later (Chapters 3 and 5), the viva is characterised by other language games besides the interrogative language game of question and answers e.g. the report, greeting and evaluative language games.

Trafford and Leshem found that the strongest candidates had received more of the following kinds of questions: defending doctorateness, contributing to knowledge, critique of research synthesising concepts and establishing links. These were questions coded as high in innovation and development of research and high in scholarship and interpretation. The failed candidates had received fewer of these kinds of questions, and more questions on resolving research problems, content of the thesis, and structure of the thesis, with the implication being that they had not covered them.

Their findings reveal how the viva can be viewed as a type of ‘communication event’, to use Murray’s term (2003), where preparing for the questions can reduce the candidate’s level of anxiety with respect to uncertainty and unpredictability.

With respect to the theoretical underlining of their research frame, there is a similar difficulty to the one encountered in the research by Jackson and Tinkler. There was no explicit reference to theory and the reader must himself/herself attempt to find traces. One concept used on several occasions by Trafford and Leshem (2002) was ‘doctorateness’. They were interested in what ‘examiners consider to be critical to doctorateness’. Examiners in their pre-viva reports stated the extent to which the thesis met the criteria for doctorateness, understood as the scholarly level of the dissertation, transparency of its arguments and topics chosen by the candidate to indicate sufficient complexity.

Trafford and Leshem sought evidence of these items in the questions asked by examiners in the actual viva, ‘Our reasoning was that “if the characteristics were present then they confirmed doctorateness”’ (2002: 39). I interpret this to mean that doctorateness was a construct proposed by the researchers on the basis of the

evidence of these kinds of questions in the viva. To use assessment terminology, the researchers were looking for construct validity in their findings, with the assumption that this construct was also what the examiners were looking for.

Nonetheless, it has to be asked if the concept of doctorateness has been theorised. Is it, for example, to do with cognitive reasoning? Is it to do with domain specific knowledge? I shall return to this in Chapters 6 and 8 when I consider what might be meant by a construct.

Trafford in a personal communication (5.3.04), wrote the following:

We coined the word ‘doctorateness’ to account for those features that are associated with the process of undertaking and achieving doctoral level research. Since Government publications refer to ‘graduateness’ as the characteristic of graduate studies, we felt entitled to use a similar noun to account for studies at the doctoral level.

He also noted that Murray (2003: 78) used the term ‘doctorateness’ to denote the invitation to students to consider ‘explicitly, where in their thesis they had engaged, explicitly with doctoral criteria.’<sup>18</sup>

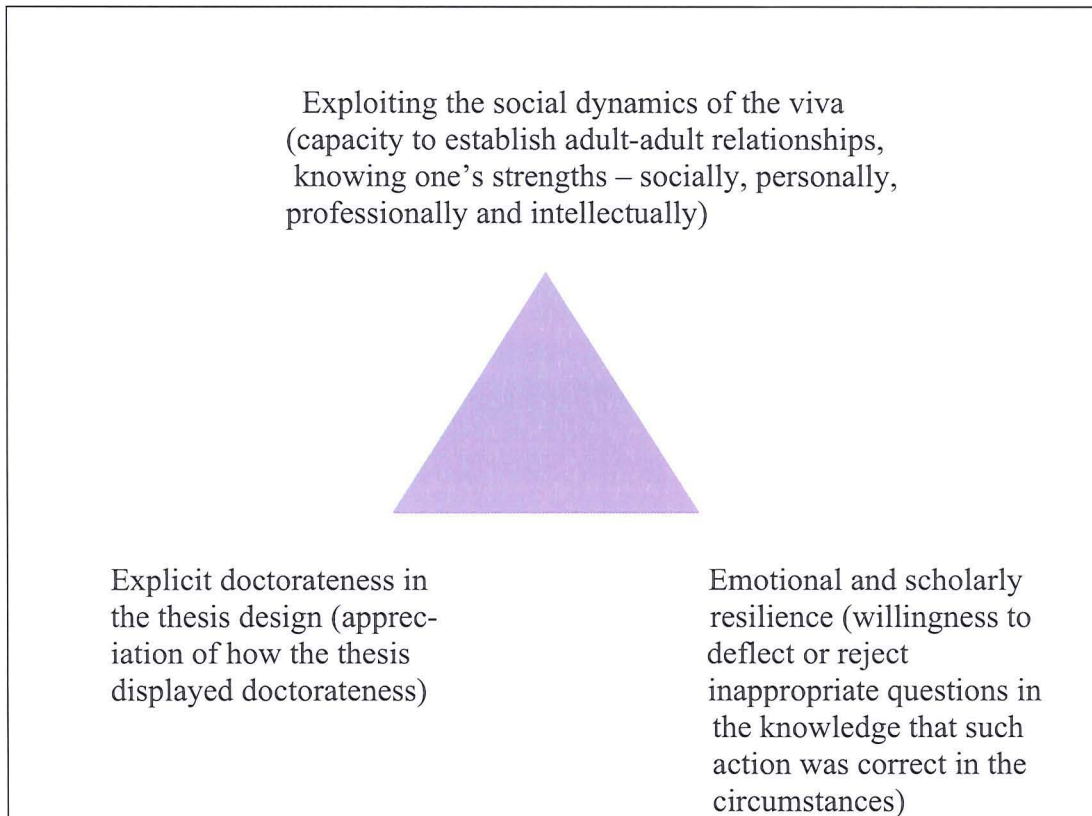
From these two comments, by Trafford and Murray respectively, the reader might suppose that doctorateness had something to do with the activity of undertaking and achieving the doctoral degree and with the formal, stated criteria in different degree regulations. However, such reflections are scarcely a theorisation of the interaction taking place in the viva.

Yet, in a less substantial piece of research, based upon a single viva, Trafford and Leshem (2002a) move towards just such a theoretical conceptualisation. They identified a synergy between social dynamics, explicit doctorateness and emotional/scholarly resilience. The diagram below depicts this:

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<sup>18</sup> Murray (2003: 78): ‘Facets of “doctorateness” include research design, presentation, coherent argument, quality of writing, a kind of three-way “fit” of design, outcomes and conclusions and initial and final contextualization.’

**Diagram: synergy in the viva (adapted from Trafford and Leshem, 2002a)**



In the same personal communication referred to above Trafford said that synergy meant:

The whole is greater than the sum of the parts. The notion assists researchers to attribute characteristics of interdependency between parts of an organisation, and then to analyse how they relate one to another.

This definition is used by Trafford and Leshem to explain how the different strategies of interaction adopted by participants – e.g. to be an active rather than passive candidate – influence the outcome. This theorisation draws upon the work of systems theory as formulated by Emery (1969). However, it is by no means certain that systems theory is the only or most appropriate way of theorising the viva. The authors do not consider alternative theories; nor that the viva is not

always geared towards achieving ‘a quasi-stationary equilibrium’ (Emery and Trist, 1969: 282) or the greatest possible ‘performativity’ (Lyotard, 1986). With performativity in mind the work of post-modern theorists of organisations, such as Boje (2001), understanding organised social interaction, and hence the viva, as always broken, fragmented and working towards a holistic self-conception through narratives, but never achieving it. See Chapter 4) and Rømer (2003, the view of assessment as new moves by participants. See Chapter 1 of this dissertation) might be pertinent.

In sum, while Trafford and Leshem have begun to theorise the academic viva, their work has yet to develop a theory that takes account of more recent developments in systems theory (e.g. those inspired by Luhmann, such as Qvortrup, 2003) and other kinds of theory.

#### **Comparing the research frames for the professional viva and the academic doctoral viva**

The research frame for the professional viva (strong in theory and methodology, weaker in policy and international comparisons) can be contrasted with the research frame for the academic doctoral viva (strong on policy, weak on theory and international comparisons and possessing a questionable understanding of the actual viva as it takes place). The table below summarises these points:

**Table: Strengths and weaknesses in the academic and professional viva research frames**

<b>Frame</b>	<b>Professional viva</b>	<b>Academic doctoral viva</b>
<b>Theory</b>	Strong	Weak
<b>Empirical understanding of viva</b>	Strong	Weak
<b>Policy</b>	Weak	Strong
<b>International comparisons</b>	Weak	Weak

The frame, to recall the conceptualisation proposed above, refers to the researcher’s definition and assignment of meaning to the viva. It is important to

underline how there appears to be no necessary agreement on what is going on in the academic viva. This might be because there is a deficit of empirical data based upon observations from actual vivas. The researcher's frame, with the exception of the work by Trafford and Leshem (2002), is based upon questionnaires to participants after the event. With respect to the professional viva, which has a stronger base in what is actually going on, there is less reason to question the research findings. This means that the academic viva, unlike the professional viva, can be questioned in terms of its content validity, since what it purports to be the case, may not in fact be the case.

If the conception of validity to include, as Messick suggests (1989), the theoretical rationales used by the researchers in the two frames, it is evident that the academic viva is significantly under-theorised, unlike the professional viva. By theory, the following is meant: a number of inter-connected and potentially interacting concepts that provide an account for the phenomenon of the viva.

The concept of 'doctorateness', whilst suggestive of a concept well-suited to measuring the construct validity of the researcher's academic frame, is similarly left under-theorised. To say that it is based upon inductive observations, as the authors do, is to sidestep the necessity of theorising the concept generated from these observations. If it is a construct, whose construct is it? How does it function, and under what conditions? In other words, the academic viva is weak on theorisation.

The professional viva is stronger on theorisation. But, no alternative theories are presented in Roberts *et al.*'s (2000) research. The socio-linguistic discourse theory is taken as true and the only conception of discourses. Foucault's view of discourse, as power/knowledge supporting confessionary practices, might have been re-visited to provide not only a different conceptualisation, but a different sense of the meaning of what is happening (Cherryholmes, 1988). Another theoretical perspective that could have been drawn upon is to be found in Scott *et al.*'s (2004) important book on the professional doctorates. They move beyond Gibbon's bifurcated distinction between disciplinary knowledge produced inside the university and trans-disciplinary knowledge outside the university to talk of different forms of domain specific knowledge that cross the boundaries between

the university and the practice setting (Dobson, 2007 b). <sup>19</sup> I shall return to the discussion of domain specific knowledge in the viva in chapter 6.

An additional point can be made if we take on board Broadfoot's (1996) point, that the ideologies expressed in assessment practices, in this case researcher's frames, should be subjected to critique. Researchers in the frame for the academic doctoral viva (Tinkler and Jackson, 2000) talked of the need for increased transparency and ensuring examiner reliability. Such policy recommendations appear to have been voiced in the belief that their own research supporting their recommendations and the recommendations themselves were value-free and politically neutral. But, from a Foucaultian (1972) perspective, their appeals to greater transparency and a more 'fair' conduct of the viva might also lead to greater surveillance and control. To argue that the viva should be more public, as in Scandinavia, is no guarantee that the control will cease or change its character. In Norway, the threshold for deciding if a dissertation is to be passed has moved from the public arena of the disputation, which is a ceremonial event to present an already approved dissertation, to the private meeting some months earlier between examiners when they make their decision and write a joint report. In a formal sense the doctoral candidate must first defend publicly their dissertation (in a *disputas*) and hold a public lecture (topic proposed two weeks earlier by the examiners) before the examiners can make a recommendation to the faculty that the degree should be awarded. However, examples of the candidate not receiving the degree on the basis of the disputation and public lecture are extremely rare.

Simply put, the ideologies expressed, either implicitly or explicitly, in the researcher's own research frames, can be subjected to a critique, where the focus is upon the researcher and their interests, and the shifting socio-cultural, political and economic conditions under which they are formed. In this particular case, the argument for greater transparency can lead to greater disciplinary control.

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<sup>19</sup> They talk of disciplinary (academic), technical (intervening in practice), dispositional (individual develops competence to reflect upon knowledge) and critical (undermining practice)

## **Conclusion**

The argument of this chapter has been that the research frame into the academic doctoral viva has been under-theorised, and while the research frame into the professional viva has developed a theory, it has not considered alternative theories. Methodologically, the research into the academic viva's research frame has been more quantitative and policy oriented, while the professional viva's research frame has been more ethnographic and qualitative.

With respect to the research presented in this dissertation, where the main focus is upon the master degree viva (Part II) and undergraduate viva (Part III) in Norway, current research frames exploring the academic doctorate viva and the professional viva in the UK can provide only limited theoretical and methodological assistance. The work of Trafford and Leshem is an exception in this respect, even if their work is limited to a theorisation based upon doctorateness and synergy.

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setting) knowledge and the manner in which they cross boundaries e.g. technical knowledge may originate in the practice setting, but find its solution in disciplinary knowledge (2004: 42).



## **Chapter 3**

### **The Viva as a Functional Entity, Social Practice and Existential Experience**

What we call the face is precisely this exceptional  
presentation of self by self, incommensurable with  
the presentation of realities simply given, always  
suspect of some swindle, always possibly dreamt up.

*Totality and Infinity, Levinas*

Chapter 1 sought to answer the question ‘why study the viva’, by undertaking a genealogical history of the viva to explain why it has survived, foregrounding debate on how it might continue to do so; and Chapter 2 asked why the viva has been under-theorised. This chapter asks if the viva can be regarded as a functional entity with social and existentially valuable components and how this might provide a foundation for valuable theoretical and empirical insights. The functional looks at the manner in which the viva belongs to two kinds of whole; firstly, connecting the viva to other different, potentially assessed components (e.g. a submitted written piece of work) and secondly, the connection of this whole to society viewed holistically. The social focuses on the viva as a social practice involving its own language games, norms and rituals of interaction. The existential focuses on the micro-level of the viva and its personal meaning for participants, in particular the candidate. The holistic, social and micro direct attention to different logical levels of analysis; namely, societal structures/processes, group and the individual. As such, the second goal of the chapter, is to show how these levels are inter-related.

### **The viva as a functional event**

Is the viva a functional, as opposed to dysfunctional event? Those believing that it is a dysfunctional event having an adverse effect upon the performance of candidates will highlight the high level of stress and anxiety it causes. In other words, precisely the existential emotions and concerns already identified above. But, such emotional ‘outbursts’ belong to the unique experience of the individual, and are not necessarily associated with the more ‘abstract and person independent’ perspective adopted by functionalists, such as Durkheim. With this caveat in mind, it is perhaps better to first approach the functional rather than the dysfunctional character of the viva, and to adopt a more person independent perspective, in keeping with classical understandings of functionalism.

Writers on assessment theory, such as Moss (1992, 1994) and Moss *et al.* (2006), would adopt a diametrically opposed approach to the viva as a functional, person independent event. Inspired by hermeneutics, they would argue for the viva as an interpretative event, founded and maintained by the interpretative work undertaken by the participants as they draw upon multiple sources of evidence for their assessments. In Chapter 4, I too will argue for a research methodology for the viva that draws upon a disclosure of actors’ meanings. However, the purpose of the opening part of this chapter is to lend weight to the view that the viva can also be conceptualised and researched as a functional event, and somewhat paradoxically, followers of hermeneutics follow this route when they talk of parts illuminating a whole. This is a central component of a functionalist approach.

The viva might be understood as a functional holistic entity that exists as a part in a larger whole. This accords with how Durkheim understood functionalism, as the integration existing first between parts on one level and their subsequent integration into society as a whole. The analogy he used for functionalism was the specialised, division of labour undertaken by societal members, who like the organs of animals, each perform their allotted task and create the ‘greater unity of the organism’ in society as a whole (Durkheim, 1984: 85). For him, the whole created was greater than the sum of the parts and it had its own characteristics. Similarly in the case of the viva, the viva forms a part of a whole, along with other submitted work, such as a dissertation or project work, which might or might not

have been assessed in a formative manner and received feedback prior to the viva. To take two examples, the Norwegian doctorate dissertation is submitted to a specially appointed committee of academics, who assess it, and, if it is approved, the candidate is permitted to take the viva. In the Norwegian master degree, the appointed committee will not let the candidate sit the viva if they have provisionally graded the dissertation as a fail (Otnes and Rånes, 2005).

The viva and other assessed work, as the examined whole, also belong to a whole on a different level; the one represented by the education system qualifying the candidate for a profession, employment or further study. In this case, the qualification integrates the successful candidate into society. Integration therefore, takes place on two levels; between the parts, and the manner in which this holistic entity (e.g. viva plus submitted dissertation, or viva and other forms of assessed work) secures integration into society as a whole, mediated by membership in a social group (e.g. the community of academics).

Accordingly, for functionalists two questions might be posed in an exploration of the viva. The first being about the manner in which the parts of the viva are connected and integrated with other elements constituting the assessment. The parts are not independent. Several of the vivas discussed in this thesis take as their topic the submitted dissertation. There is a line of dependency between the two. Often, it is the exam regulations that state the terms of the formal, manifest functional connection e.g. that the viva is to test the authenticity of the submitted dissertation. The viva is always dependent on something: a dissertation, a skill learnt that is to be discussed, books read, and so on. The viva as a spoken event is not therefore, independent of other forms of learning and student work.

The connection between these parts, understood as a dependency, that may or may not be mutual and symmetrical or equal, is what defines the integration of the parts on the level of the exam. It has a *manifest* functional dependency in the formal stated examination rules that stipulate how the dissertation is to be examined in the viva. These rules often vary according to the type of degree and the institution making the award. There is also a *latent* connection between the dissertation and the viva, when words and phrases contained in the dissertation are

used by the examiners and the candidate in the viva; such that it becomes an event talked into being.<sup>20</sup>

The second question that a functionalist might pose, is about the whole formed by the viva and the dissertation in terms of its function in society as a whole. The examination<sup>21</sup> might qualify the candidate as a member of the academic community in the respective discipline (Delamont *et al.*, 2000). To take another example, the professional viva taken by newly qualified GPs in the UK, is part of a larger exam where other separately examined parts include a video showing some of their own consultations, along with written assessed work. The exam as a whole permits membership of College of General Practitioners (Royal College of General Practitioners, 2001). In the academic viva, the viva examines all the parts as a spoken event based upon the written dissertation. The video and written work are not examined in the GP viva. In other words, in the case of the professional viva, the bonds of dependency between the parts of the examination as a whole, are less than in the academic viva. The same is true of some professional doctorates, where the candidate sits a viva based upon the completed dissertation, but only after they have completed different forms of written assignment that are assessed independently (Scott *et al.*, 2004). Nevertheless, what the whole

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<sup>20</sup> The functional whole created by the connection and integration of the written with the spoken in the academic viva can be understood in a different way. Here, I am thinking of the work done by Kress, on multi-modal literacy. For Kress (2003: 4, 32-33), the spoken is a mode founded upon the materiality of sound and a sequential ordering of statements. The written form of the dissertation is founded upon the materiality of words and likewise their sequential ordering, as words follow each other, paragraphs follow paragraphs and so on. The written, however, in addition to the sequential ordering of the words, has an element of the mode of the image in that it has a spatial constitution permitting simultaneous and less sequential ordering; words are spaced on pages in 2 dimensions. There may for example be diagrams; they can be read simultaneously or out of order. Put differently and in the context of the viva, the viva is organized sequentially in time, and while the written dissertation is organised sequentially in time, its spatial organization on pages also permits a simultaneous and out of order reading path.

The two modes - the spoken and the written are therefore different in their time (sequential) and spatial constitution (permitting out of order reading). Moreover, in the viva the written mode interacts with the spoken, as the spoken makes continual references to the written. Thus, writing becomes speech made visible in the viva, and the viva can lead to the opposite, speech can be noted by the examiners in their reports, as speech transcribed. The spoken and the written can function to form a whole, or hybrid entity that is not speech independent of the mode of the written, nor written independent of the mode of the spoken.

<sup>21</sup> In the case of the Master in Education viva discussed in this dissertation, the degree was awarded on the basis of the dissertation examined by viva (50% of total degree) in year 2 and 3 written essays (50% of total degree) submitted in year one. I am therefore simplifying when I give the impression that the grade from the viva was the sole criterion for acceptance in the academic community. The acceptance threshold, permitting doctoral study, was a viva result and three essay grades weighted to give the final grade of A or B.

represented by the different forms of examination taken by the candidate secures, is the social integration of the candidate into society, along with others who are similarly qualified. This societal integration confers a (elite) status upon the successful graduate; such that in the words of Bourdieu (1996: 102), 'a function of consecration' has been realised.

An additional question explored by a functionalist might be the role of the viva as a form of assessment as distinct from the function performed by other forms of assessment. Chapter 1 reported research by Levine and McGuire (1970) that demonstrated that medical student vivas were particularly valid when it came to assessing communication, and certain kinds of cognitive thought (inductive and deductive reasoning, arriving at inferences and problem solving). Meanwhile multiple choice examinations were superior when it came to the recall of information, and written examinations were as good when it came to assessing interpretation. In other words, the function of the viva is different to the function of the multiple choice and the written examination. Yet, such a functionalist conclusion is not as straight forward as it appears: the viva examination might measure the same constructs/competence as the written examination, but unreliably (Muzzin and Hart, 1985: 82).

To summarise up to this point, a functional understanding of the viva seeks to show the lines of *dependencies* between the parts of the viva, such as the spoken event of the viva and the dissertation upon which it focuses. Thus, the viva, together with the dissertation, can create a whole on the level of the examination. On another level, the academic viva/dissertation acts as a functional entity for society as a whole because it secures the *social integration* of candidates into academic communities and into society as a whole. Finally, the viva might assess a different set of constructs/competencies to other forms of assessment.

The functional approach is open to the criticism that it emphasises harmony and stability. However, there may be instances of candidates who are not allowed to enter the academic community, if their dissertation or performance in the viva is judged wanting. In such cases, the viva does not become a site for social integration, but refusal and especially conflict if the candidate disagrees with the

judgments of examiners.<sup>22</sup> This might be called a dysfunctional event, or in the terminology of Durkheim (1984), an instance of *anomie* (normlessness) may arise if the candidate questions the norms of the academic community. On the level of the relation between the spoken viva and the written, submitted dissertation, there may also be conflicts, rather than a functional hybrid entity based upon harmony, for example, when the viva fails to do justice to a 50,000 word dissertation in a viva within the allotted time of approximately one hour. Elements of the dissertation can remain undiscussed, and in the move to the spoken, complexity of argumentation might be lost or transformed into a more simple lexical vocabulary. Against such a criticism, it might be argued that the viva completes the dissertation, by drawing out the points in the 50,000 word dissertation that are unclear or open to misunderstanding.

It may be the case that a functional approach can still be used in conceptualising and understanding the viva, but this will require closer attention to the elements of conflict that can arise on the level of the viva and with respect to social integration. Foucault's (1972) work on discourses in institutional contexts might provide a framework for such a conflict-functionalist approach (I shall not adopt this approach for reasons given later in this chapter). Meanwhile, Delamont *et al.* (2000) in their study of (doctoral) candidates becoming members of the academic community, through an at times long and conflict laden process, have developed a critical-functionalist approach inspired by the work of Bourdieu (1996) and his concept of the *habitus*. The conflictual aspect might also be included if it is paired with the view that elements can be considered dysfunctional. However, the functional/dysfunctional pair is not easily understood as a dialectical relation, as the dysfunctional is considered morally of a lower order than the functional and to be eliminated. Put simply, the functional/dysfunctional pairing is not well-suited to capturing dialectical relations between opposing elements. It remains too dualist.

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<sup>22</sup> For example, an academic in England reported how one of his doctoral examiners had behaved in an improper manner during the viva. Disliking the viva the examiner had smashed it angrily on the table. The candidate made a formal complaint and the viva became a source of conflict. This example was referred to in Chapter 1.

### **The viva as a social practice**

The functional understanding of the viva, while focusing on the whole and parts, still rests upon the assumption that the viva is a social encounter, a social encounter, which can be understood in turn through its language games, norms and rituals. In short, it is a social practice, formed over time and in space and it is unlike the social encounter of the written or multiple choice examination, where the examiners are rarely present; and if they are, it is usually to merely observe, and not to converse with candidates.

Goffman, the sociologist, in his numerous books on the theatrical character of social interaction sought to understand the manner in which participants acted to manage and save face in and through social practices. Such a perspective provides valuable insight into the viva. As he put it:

...the individual in ordinary work situations presents himself and his activity to others...he guides and controls the impression they form of him (Goffman, preface: 1969).

The individual is called upon to make performances that are believable, and in the terminology of Levinas (1969), losing face cannot be tolerated. Secondly, interaction is organised in phases, with an opening, a period of continued interaction and finally a closing phase, which might include a summing up of what has taken place. The phased character of events with the expectation that it is organised in clearly identifiable phases makes social experience bounded and predictable. Thirdly, the interaction is performed spatially, with an on-stage and public zone where one is visible, and an off-stage more private zone, where preparations for the performance and reflections afterwards are undertaken.

The point I want to make here, and it is relevant to the social practice of the viva, is that participants cannot behave as they wish. The viva is a normative activity. Ethnomethodologists have gone further, and directed attention as to how the norms are made in the actual situation, and cannot be pre-defined in an *a priori* manner. So when the norms, such as correct behaviour at a public doctoral disputation in Norway exist in pre-defined written guidelines, they have to be

enacted in the actual event, and it is possible for participants to interpret them in their own ways, or to possibly even transgress them.

In Part II of this dissertation, I will look at how the viva is ‘talked into being’ by participants, such that a perspective which seeks to identify only pre-defined and pre-given norms fails to capture the often minute ways in which norms are generated and enacted in the actual viva.

So, if norms have to be enacted and the possibility exists of new ones arising in the actual viva, perhaps as new permutations, this should not mean that the viva cannot solidify into ritualistic and more repetitive practices on consecutive occasions. It is perhaps more the case that a dialectic exists, between the rituals that slow the development of the viva into new forms, and certain instances of the viva that open for changes in the manner in which the ritual is enacted on each occasion.

A social practice based upon stability and change can be explored with the introduction of some terms proposed by Wittgenstein in his later work. For Wittgenstein, ‘the speaking of language is part of an activity, or a form of life’ (Wittgenstein, 1994: §23). And in each form of life, such as the viva, certain ‘language games’ can be found. For example, giving a report, speculating, describing, telling a story, guessing and so on can be regarded as games that are not merely played in a frivolous care-free manner, as is usually thought to be the case with games, but used in real situations with real consequences and accompanied by rules and expected moves. The existence of the same games on recurrent occasions indicates and brings stability to the social practice. The fact that games can be played differently (‘new moves in an old game’) or new games introduced, implies that change in the social practice is also a possibility (Lyotard, 1986: 61) (See earlier points on new narrative moves in Chapter 1). The origin of a new language game can be caused by a change in the language game itself (e.g. a key element in the game is omitted or moved/used in a different manner) or by a change in the ‘form of life’ in which the game is embedded (Levinson, 1992: 68). In the former case the ‘form of life’ might or might not be modified as a result of the modification of the game. It is possible to read Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations* (1994) to mean that language games are reduced to the ‘form of



life' i.e. that only the latter case is relevant, with the form of life modifying the language game. I would argue that the former case must also be included, the language game changing, keeping in mind precisely how it might impact upon the 'form of life'.

It is necessary to pause for a moment and reflect upon what might be meant by the term language games. On the one hand, as indicated above, a game can be something trivial and frivolous, something children do, such as playing Monopoly in leisure time. This is consistent with the view of a game as referring to an activity as an end in-itself, and different to work activity, which produces something for later use and learning activity, which learns something for later use in a potentially different context. This is not Wittgenstein's understanding of a language game. He does not maintain a distinction between play, work and learning when discussing language games, as is common among human activity theorists inspired by Vygotsky and Leont'ev (Dobson and Haaland, 1993). Put simply, a language game is played and used in work and learning contexts (Steinsholt, 2006: 65). To summarise, Wittgenstein develops the concept of language games in three inter-connected ways in *Philosophical Investigations* (1994). Firstly, languages, like games of play, have rules and can be learnt in a playful manner. Secondly, as argued in the previous paragraph, language is a game in the sense that new moves are possible when it is used, and this may change the manner in which the game is played, such as adding the buying and selling of celebrity contracts, not properties, in Monopoly will change it as a game. Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, language games refer to the manner in which words are embedded in, and connected with activities. They are not used in an abstraction from a purposeful activity.

Activities are therefore connected to 'forms of life' and the viva is regarded in this dissertation as an example of a particular 'form of life' in which different language games can be found. I shall, however, use the term social practice instead of form of life, not to disagree with the term 'form of life', but to underline the social character of the viva, as seen in the manner in which examiner judgments collectively determine the final grade of the candidate.

In looking at how the viva is 'talked into being' (Part II) I shall be concerned with the different language games that can be found in the concrete cases studied. These language games are about talk, and talk the viva into existence; but it is always talk as an activity, connected with the assessment of the candidate, and not talk as an abstraction, as a set of signs disconnected from the activity. In focus will be the manner in which existing language games and accompanying viva activities have a stabilising, normative influence, controlling and seeking to refuse the arrival of other new and potentially disruptive language games. To take a simple example, on entering the room for the viva, it is normal for the candidate to be welcomed in a greeting language game. The candidate however, might feel uncomfortable if there were no such welcoming statements, such as 'nice to meet you' or 'how are you?' The occurrence of such a scenario would change the social practice of the viva, unsettling in particular the candidate. Another example of a language game is found when grading the candidate is being considered. This is an evaluative language game as a judgment is reached on the candidate. Disagreements might arise between the examiners, but it is still within the same language game. Other language games to be expected in the viva are the report, when knowledge is denoted through description or assertions purporting truth or falsity in a local or universal sense, and the interrogative language game with questions and answers (Lyotard, 1986: 20).

In sum, while the viva can be understood as a social encounter, it is not necessarily a totally predictable and norm-governed social practice and ritual. The unexpected can be said and provide evidence of new or differently used language games. In broad terms, the argument I am making is similar to the one proposed by socio-linguists, such as Gumperz and Hymes (1986: 16), where:

Speakers share knowledge of the communicative constraints and options governing a significant number of social situations, they can be said to be members of the same speech community...All that is required is that there be at least one language in common and that rules governing basic communicative strategies be shared so that speakers can decode the social meanings carried by alternative modes of communication.

In place of modes of communication, I would use the term language games and instead of a speech community, I would talk of a form of life, expressed in a social practice. Put simply, spoken language games influence and are influenced by the social practice in which they are spoken.

It is perfectly possible to conceptualise the viva using the concept of discourse, as defined by Foucault (1972), instead of the concept of language games:

[...] sometimes using it to mean the general domain of all statements (énoncés), sometimes as an indivisible group of statements (énoncés), and sometimes as an ordered practice which takes account of a certain number of statements (énoncés) (Foucault, 1972: 20).

These different levels of the discourse can be found in the viva and it must be remembered that statements in Foucault's conception are above all active and performative in the sense of relating to what participants say and do. Discourse, in the French *discours*, means to talk or converse. I have not sought to use and develop the concept of discourse, despite its potential pertinence to this project for two reasons. Firstly, Foucault's methodology appeals to an institutional approach and the viva, especially in Part II of this dissertation is not primarily explored from the institutional level, but from the more micro-orientated level of the individual instances of the viva and how individual's talk the viva into being. Secondly, Foucault's discourse approach, in my opinion fails to capture the chess-like moves and counter-moves made by individuals as they reason and defend their work/opinions.

Of course it might be countered that Foucault (1984: 195, 139), especially in his later work, looked to the control of the body on a micro-level, what he referred to as an 'anatomo-politics of the human body', and its position in strategies of power. But, I still believe his focus remained upon structures in practice and in talk (discourses), such that the existential and unique character of the individual and their experiences was downplayed,

### **The viva as an existential experience**

The functional perspective and the viva as a social practice reach over, as an umbrella, to determine and influence participants' personal and existential experience of the viva. This influence is never total or in a one-way direction. Participant experiences can influence social practices with consequences for functional dependencies. The observation that the viva can be an existentially important event for candidates is something of a truism and nothing new, even if a recent publication with the striking title, *Surviving the Viva* (Murray, 2003), might lead us to believe that the anxiety it can generate has passed by previous generations unnoticed. The viva seems always to have been accompanied with a certain heightening of the emotions and a consequent vulnerability (see etymology of the viva in the Introduction). Take the following reference in the Oxford English Dictionary (<http://www.oed.com>):

The description of his viva will bring vivid recollections of similar tortures to many minds (Athenæum, 19.12.1891).

From my interviews with experienced viva examiners in Norway, here are two answers to a question about memorable vivas they had experienced:

It is worst when the candidate appeals to feelings to compensate for a lack of knowledge. It is difficult to differentiate between crying, nerves and knowledge...but I manage usually to see what lies behind. (Professor in philosophy, 50 years old, 25 years experience of examining vivas) <sup>23</sup>

We said, it will turn out all right and he cried after he received his final grade...we almost cried when he began to cry...he had not thought he would make it...when they are full of emotion I too am full of emotion. (Senior lecturer in education, 45 years old, 5 years experience of examining vivas) <sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> "Værst når kandidaten appeller til følelser for å kompensere for mangle på kunnskap. Det er vanskelig å skille mellom gråt, nerver og kunnskap..men jeg greier vanligvis å gjennomskue det."

Both mention the role of crying, one as an attempt to cover up a presumed lack of knowledge, the other, highlighting the inter-subjective character of shared emotions.

Other forms of assessment, such as multiple choice and the written exam also give rise to heightened emotions, but the emotional expression is not, or rarely, shared in a direct inter-subjective manner with the examiners. The examiners are usually separated in time and space. And if they are present, the candidate is not allowed to discuss how to answer the set questions.

Understanding the viva as an arena for the expression of emotions, both those of the examiners and candidates, precisely directs attention to its dependency upon emotions and how they are evoked, and not the least, controlled. Joughin (2007) also drew attention to the presence of emotions, such as ‘anxiety’ and ‘fear of making a fool of oneself’ in his research on oral presentations in front of peers.<sup>25</sup> The question that can be posed is the following: How should emotions and their existential role in the context of the viva be theorised?

According to Heidegger (1962), emotions revealed the existential state of a person. For him this existential state was imminent in concrete lived everyday existence, what he termed the ontic, the that-which-is of entities, *das Seiende* in German, and usually translated simply as ‘being’. The existential referred to how a person lived the ontic in a certain manner (e.g with joy or anxiety). Heidegger called this Being (*das Sein*), as it referred to the Being of being (*das Seiende*). To gain access to it, one could ask, ‘how one is, and how one is faring?’ And listen to the respondent’s tone, as an emotional mood colouring the reply (Heidegger, 1962, 173,205). If the candidate is nervous and shaky in their voice it indicates an existential Being of angst and uncertainty. The problem with Heidegger’s existential analysis, what might be called an existential psychoanalysis, is that it reveals only the state of the person in phenomenological fashion, and says nothing

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<sup>24</sup> ”vi sa: ‘det går bra’ og han gråt etter han fikk karakter...vi nesten gråt når han begynnt å gråte...han hadde ikke tenkte han skulle greie det....nå de er rørt blir jeg selv rørt.”

<sup>25</sup> Ahmed *et al.* (1999) also drew attention to the stress felt by candidates in orals as compared to written examinations. But, their research did not cover higher education, and the orals in geography were designed to give low achievers a sense of achievement (Geography Certificate of Achievement).

of the ethical quality of the existential experience, before, during or after it takes place.

For this reason, I shall argue that the existential character of the viva, in terms of its emotions, must also be understood in ethical terms. It was Spinoza (1989) in his *Ethics*, who was perhaps in modern times the first to reflect upon the manner in which human servitude rests upon the passions, and how reason could be used to control and escape from this servitude. Controlling the emotions, or passions as he called them, was in his opinion an ethical task for individuals, and it is important in the viva. Thus, it is not unusual for ethical guidelines to be proposed for the viva, such that participants are called upon to act according to an accepted decorum, and to keep their emotions in check. This is the case for the Norwegian doctorate viva (see guidelines passed by the Norwegian Council of Universities, 1996), but not with respect to the master degree viva. Ethics, thus covers decorum and holding emotions under control, and can be defined as the study of moral standards and how they affect conduct.

However, more can be said about the existential control required in the viva and its relation to the question of ethical behaviour (Dobson, 2008a). I have in mind the inspiration provided by Levinas in his reflections upon the role of the face, in face-to-face meetings between people. Is it not the case that in the viva, participants must defend their views through their spoken and facially communicated presence? The ethical character of this defence and how, in the viva, it rests upon and is mediated by the face and voice, defines the locus of my interest in this context.

Levinas, a well-known phenomenologist, has proposed a philosophy resting upon the presence of the other's face. In rehearsing some of his arguments, it is possible to find a certain understanding and justification for the viva as a form of assessment. Levinas in *Totality and Infinity* begins by looking at how meaning is produced. He asserts that 'meaning is not produced as an ideal essence; it is said and taught by presence' and teaching, one of his concerns, 'is not reducible to sensible or intellectual intuition' (1969:67). Meaning is not therefore produced 'in' the mind, separated from external others. Levinas develops his perspective by noting that 'speech consists in "coming to the assistance" of the word...it brings

what the written word is already deprived of: mastery. Speech, better than a simple sign, is essentially magisterial' (1969: 69). It is important to understand what Levinas is proposing, namely that speech by a person present has a protreptic goal. It teaches and the question becomes, what does it teach? Speech marks a presence of the other and this carries with it an obligation to listen to what they have to say. But, it is not primarily the teaching of content that Levinas wishes to highlight. It entails a willingness to be open before making a decision on the truth, falsity or dissimulation carried in the content of what is said or in the manner in which it is said. The call to openness is an ethical obligation on the part of those present.

In the context of the viva, it is speech connected with and emanating from the face that causes us to break out of an egoism we might otherwise wish to keep. The presence of the face of the other 'introduces into me what was not in me' (Levinas: 1969: 203). In accordance with Merleau-Ponty's (1968) chiasm of shared corporeal inter-subjectivity, Levinas demonstrates how we are drawn into a state of shared contingency and sociality in our relations with others.

The calling upon examiners to make a judgment on the basis of a limited number of responses by the candidate in a limited amount of time, means that the face of the candidate might become important for extrapolating a view of the candidate's ability as a whole. This reverberates with the view of some Greek philosophers e.g. Aristotle's (1991) view that a person's – in this context, a candidate's - character and emotions can exert a rhetorical influence on the examiners. This will be returned to in Chapter 7 in a discussion of enthusiasm and courage in the viva.

Levinas drew conclusions from his discussion of the face-to-face encounter; it entailed an ethical relation to the concrete and existing – such as the viva - in addition to and beyond reflections on its ontological and ontic status as a source of knowledge.<sup>26</sup> Put differently, openness to the other contains an ethical obligation founded upon an acceptance of contingency and respecting the right of the other to this contingency. This will exert an influence on later conclusions for participants on the truth content of what has been said and how. In other words,

content of what is said cannot be regarded as independent and neutral to the corporeal presence of those communicating.

What of the viva? In Levinas's terminology the existential character of the viva, revealed in the emotions and especially the corporeal presence of those present, obligates participants to be open to the contingency of what is to be said and heard. Even though this ethical obligation to openness appears to be absolute in the sense that the 'face opens the primordial discourse whose first word is obligation, which no "interiority" permits avoiding' (1969:201), it is possible for this openness to be resisted through deceit.<sup>27</sup> Examiners and also candidates, might 'fill their ears with wax' before the viva and resist this openness. What of the candidates who, through facial and corporeal strategies (e.g. acting confidently and smiling, knowing that they are answering weakly/incorrectly), dissimulate their lack of knowledge, such that they are not following the obligation to openness? Therefore, while an ethical approach to understanding the existential character of the viva and its emotions has its relevance, it also has its limitations. An existential understanding of the viva must be widened to include not merely the emotions and the ethical relations of those present, but also the willingness to be open and maintain this willingness beyond the initial opening sequence of the viva.

In sum, the viva can be understood existentially as an encounter where emotions of the candidate reveal how they are faring and the faces of those present can obligate, but not always in an absolute sense, participants to be open to what is being said. This existential experience is communicated and revealed in a corporeal manner, such that the *flesh of the body*, Merleau-Ponty's (1968) phrase, becomes energised and interacts with other senses, such as the vocal (voice) and the visual (the look).

### **Summary of the chapter**

This chapter has sought to answer the question 'why study the viva' in three ways: firstly, by understanding the functional character of the viva it becomes possible

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<sup>26</sup> Levinas's goal was clear: to highlight Heidegger's concern with the ontological and ontic and consistent neglect of the ethical.



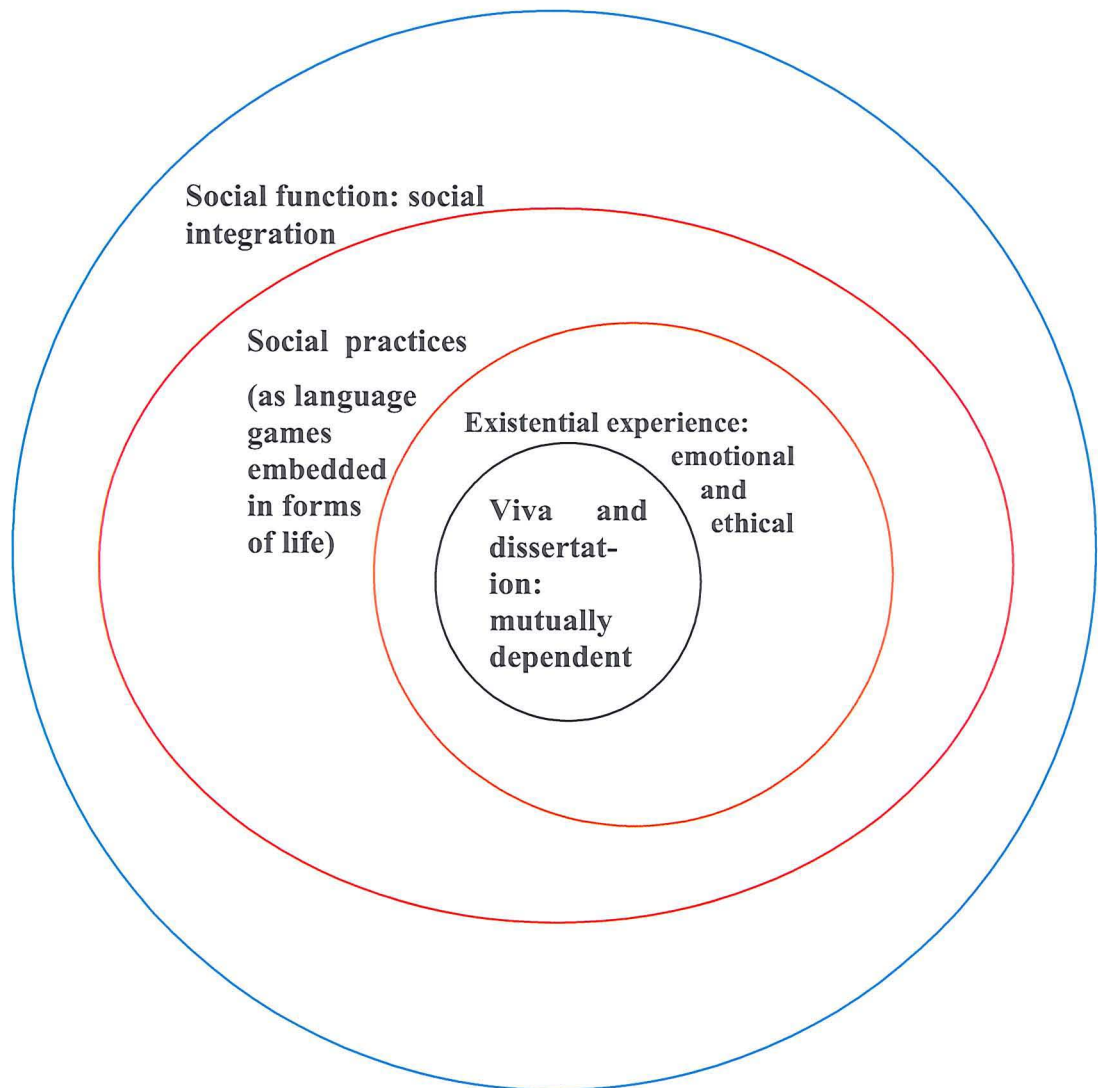
to understand more about the manner in which society is maintained and reproduced. Secondly, it is important to find out more about how the viva has established and continues to establish itself as a social practice persisting over time, with an enduring ritualistic and norm governed character. Thirdly, the viva has a role to play as an existentially valuable, if stressful, emotional face-to-face experience. Ethical relations can be established and secured, and more knowledge about these relations are required. The viva is different compared to the written and multiple choice examination in terms of its function (assessing among other things verbal communication and forms of cognitive reasoning), as a social practice (inter-subjective with examiners present) and existential experience (emotions are shared with examiners). In a broad sense, what these three approaches show, is that the viva is valuable for different reasons (functionally, socially and existentially) and further theoretical and empirical study along these lines might reveal more of these valued components.

On the one hand, each of these lines, the existential, the social and the functional look at different levels of analysis, being respectively the personal, group and the more abstract concepts of the holistic and societal. This might mean that it is difficult, if not impossible to integrate them into a single inter-related perspective. On the other hand, beginning with the functional and its concern with the social integration of holistic entities into society, it is apparent that it rests upon social practices as forms of life containing language games, and in turn these social practices can influence, or face resistance from the existential experiences of participants. These inter-connections support the view that the components are in fact inter-related and inter-dependent, as layers are to an onion, with its centre being itself a functional whole created by the mutual dependency of the written dissertation upon the viva (see diagram below).

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<sup>27</sup> Levinas still contends, 'but deceit and veracity already presuppose the absolute authenticity of the face.' (1969:202).

**Diagram: Functional, social practices and existential experience as inter-related layers**



Consider the following example as an illustration of the diagram above. This interview took place at an early point in my research, when I had yet to make the decision that PhDs in England would not be a prime focus in my research:

The degree was a Critical and Creative Writing PhD with a dissertation, novel and a viva on the representation of madness in black literature...The novel and thesis had to inter-marry and speak to each other...We were the first batch. You could decide the weighting and I chose a 60000 word novel and 40000 for the thesis...Another women who passed she negotiated and chose her examiner and supervisor. She knew the tutors, and had a history with them.

What was your viva like?

It was very difficult...I saw my novel supervisor just before going in...he was crest fallen in expression...The viva took place in a small office where I had to turn my head for eye contact between them...And I continually wondered if I had held eye contact long enough before turning to the other....If I had 20 questions 17 were on dissertation...my external examiner was an expert on Caribbean literature, not Afro-American, and I needed an expert on both of these...It was outside of her field...Needed somebody like Paul Gilroy...I didn't argue that many points...it was all over in 40 minutes...They had already decided....I didn't know they could just say a M.Phil...I thought they would give me a re-write.

All the elements I have discussed in this chapter were present and inter-woven. The functional covers the dissertation, novel and viva, and for the candidate the nature of them as a holistic entity was flexible and open to negotiation in the years running up to the viva. But in the actual viva, it was the dissertation that dominated in terms of questioning. The candidate was seeking to become accepted by and integrated into the academic community of experts on black literature. The exam was very much a social practice with language games. The candidate was particularly aware of the interrogative language game, and how she

had not really argued her points in reply to their questions. The exam was also an arena for existential experiences: the look of the crest-fallen tutor, the cramped office heightening the difficulty of looking at both examiners at the same time.

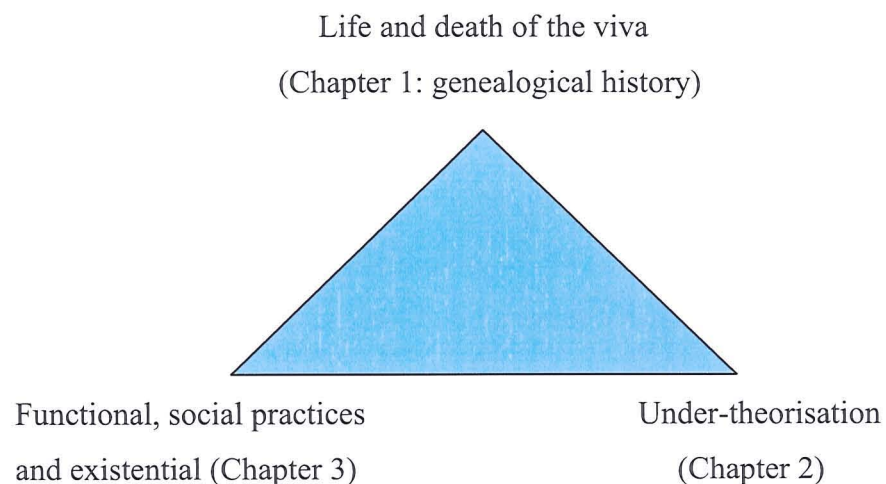
There is a family resemblance between the critical and creative writing doctorate and other forms of doctorate, such as the professional doctorate and the doctorate by publication (Dobson, 2008). These ‘innovations’ to the doctorate all question and extend the more traditional holistic entity of the single dissertation and a viva. The unsuccessful candidate experienced a new form of doctorate where the relationship between the parts was hard to anticipate. How was she to know that the examiners would ask so few questions on the novel, with the implication that the dissertation was more important than the novel?

While accepting the arguments that the existential, social and functional represent different levels of analysis and that there is also an inter-relation and inter-dependency between the levels, in this dissertation I shall concentrate in particular upon developing a theoretical understanding of the viva as a social practice. This does not mean that the existential or functional will be completely neglected. Where appropriate, these perspectives, will be drawn upon to advance the understanding of the viva as a social practice. For example, in Part II, as a theory and methodology is developed to explore the viva as a social practice, the existential focus upon the individual will be retained. The existential interest in corporeal experiences will also be retained as different forms of expression and communication are considered. The functional interest in wholes and how they are based upon the dependencies of the parts, as well as the inter-dependency between wholes, will occupy a central position in Part II’s desire to understand the social practice of the viva in terms of five component parts, namely narratives, conversation analysis, language games, common sense reasoning and background factors. However, it must be added at this stage that evidence of wholes may in some instances be unclear/diffuse or the lines of dependency can be multi-directional and have multiple sources.

### Answer to the question ‘why study the viva?’

The question posed in Part I was simply, why study the viva? Chapters 1-3 have sought to answer the question in different ways: Chapter 1 by looking at the changing genealogical history of the viva, Chapter 2 by considering contemporary academic research on the viva and Chapter 3 by considering how, and if the viva might be understood in terms of its function, as a social practice and existentially. As each chapter develops its own way of looking at the viva, it is unsurprising that the result, when the three chapters are placed alongside each other, is a multi-faceted answer to the question. Put differently, and in Nietzschean terms, plural truths concerning the viva are revealed, not only within each chapter because each chapter presents potentially different perspectives on the viva (e.g. the truth of the viva in Greco-Roman times is different to contemporary times or the truth in functional terms is different to the existential truth), but also between chapters with the different focal points: historical, under-theorisation, or social practice/functional/existential. The diagram below presents this inter-relation in broad terms:

**Diagram: the plural truths of the viva from three perspectives**



It is also worth noting that while the approaches of the three chapters can be separated analytically, they are inter-related in the sense that one chapter can be read from the standpoint and interests of another chapter, and to some extent this has already been undertaken in the actual chapters. Thus, in assessing the position of the *viva* in early Christianity in Chapter 1, it was necessary to theorise and

consider its function. Chapter 2 made points on the historical juncture of contemporary research on academic and professional vivas, and this juncture was also discussed in Chapter 1. Chapter 3, with its tripartite division into the functional, social practices and existential, was in many senses an attempt to begin theorising the viva, and make amends for precisely the under-theorisation identified in Chapter 2, although without applying this theorisation to the case of UK research on the doctoral viva and the professional viva.

## **Part II: How is the Viva ‘Talked into being’?**

## **Chapter 4**

### **Developing a Methodology to Research the Viva**

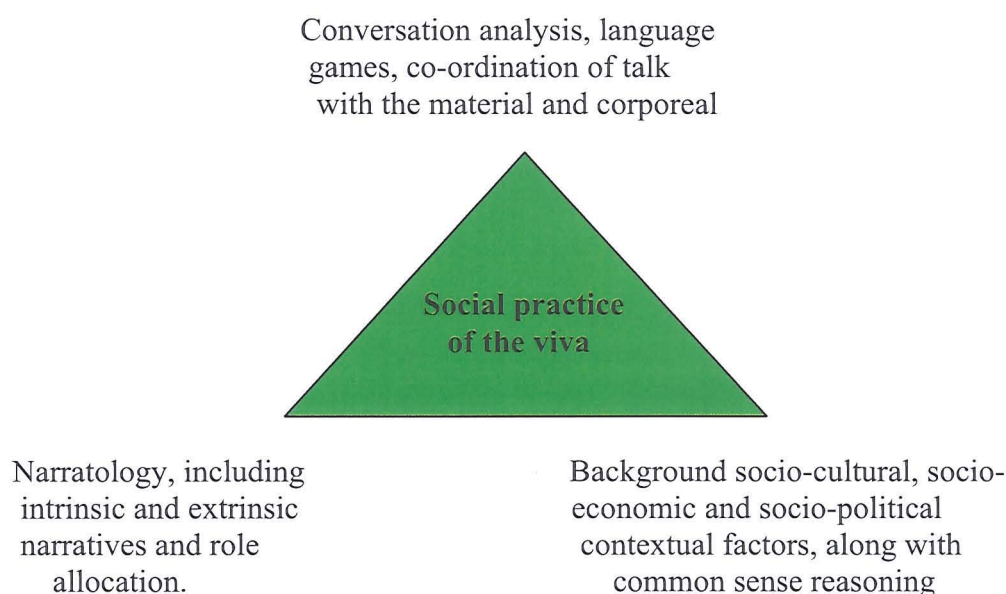
For what is sillier than to talk about talking,  
since talking in itself is ever a silly business,  
except when it is indispensable?

*De Oratore, Book I, Cicero*

Central to the endeavour of researching the viva as it is ‘talked into being’ is the view that filming a viva and its accompanying examiner meetings provide a sought after, but rarely obtained, source of empirical data. A methodology is required for the analysis of the filmed viva and the argument of this chapter is that it entails language games, conversation analysis, narratology, and an understanding of background socio-cultural/socio-economic/socio-political contextual factors, along with common sense reasoning. The diagram below summarises these concerns:



### **Diagram: Researching the viva as a social practice**



This chapter has the following sections: defining the object of research; qualitative research; technology, filming and ethical issues; selecting cases and the issue of generalisation; conversation analysis; and narratology and transcription.

In Part II, as already noted in the Preface, the focus is narrowed from the doctoral and professional viva to the Master in Education viva. This makes it possible to concentrate the research focus, rather than covering many forms of the viva. Permission to film is also an important factor in determining the choice of Norway as a site for the empirical research.

#### **Defining the object of research**

The candidate enters a room and meets the examiners. They ask questions, and the candidate attempts to answer. The candidate leaves the room and waits to be called in again when the examiners have reached their decision. The viva is premised upon talk and the question posed in part II of the dissertation is simply:

**How is the viva talked into being?**

Research (Jackson and Tinkler, 2001) cited in Chapter 2 demonstrated that the actual point of decision making on a UK candidate's doctoral dissertation is not necessarily when and how they perform in the viva. Such a view downplays the need to understand what is going on in the viva. Checking authentication is an obvious function of the viva. And there are cases of the academic viva where the goal is to see if candidates are capable of defending in an oral manner, through reason, arguments they have earlier submitted in textual form. Trafford and Leshem (2002), in arguing that synergy between candidate and the examiners (understood as a source of emotional resilience and social dynamics) are important, lend further support to the view that the viva is important in determining final outcomes. Yet while the findings of Trafford and Leshem and their subsequent theorisation are interesting, there are some obvious weaknesses in their methodology. For example, they only noted the questions asked by examiners in the viva. So, once again the research question remains, what is going on in the viva?

In the contrast between a focus on the viva as it takes place, my argument, and a focus based upon interviews/questionnaires after (or before) the event (Jackson and Tinkler, 2001), I am obviously staging the debate between a metaphysics of presence (defined by Derrida, 1976: 12, as the 'absolute proximity of voice and being') versus a metaphysics of distance in the desire to research and understand the viva. Giving primacy to either side is a dangerous game as deconstructionalists, since Derrida (1976) have pointed out (Stronach, 1997: 28). As if getting closer to reality by presence necessarily means that 'reality' is disclosed, or alternatively, that a separation by time or space necessarily ensures a more objective, disengaged and informed 'look' at reality<sup>28</sup>. Nevertheless, gaining access to the viva as it takes place does provide the opportunity to witness the importance of precisely 'presence', understood not merely in an ontic sense, but also ontologically, as the space for the Being of being<sup>29</sup>. The presence I am thinking of is not however, limited to the simple presence of the participants as a founding moment. It is also the importance of researchers becoming part of this

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<sup>28</sup> Dunne *et al.* inspired by Derrida note that 'speech is privileged in courts of law and viva voce examinations' (2005: 140).

<sup>29</sup> For more detail on the difference between the ontic and the ontological, see the points on Heidegger in Chapter 3. See also the final paragraph of the dissertation (Chapter 8), and Dobson (2008). For an interpretation more in the spirit of deconstruction, see Dobson, 2004: 184-185.

presence, either directly observing the viva or letting the camera do the observation. Ignoring the relevance of this kind of presence to an understanding of the viva, and justifying this stance with a metaphysics of distance, is to risk missing important insights. It is to risk making the viva into a lifeless event accessed by only interviews and questionnaires; and as a consequence lacking a fleshy, material consistence based upon observing the use of the body, artifacts and the accompanying material structure (of the room, furniture...etc).

At this stage it is necessary to recall once again why the doctoral viva in Norway has not been the object of research in this dissertation. In Norway, the doctoral candidate's dissertation has to be first approved by a group of examiners. Only after this is the candidate allowed to sit the *disputas*. This viva is therefore, not a high stake examination; it possesses more the character of a ceremonial event. The master viva in Norway however, is a high stake event, where failure is a distinct possibility. In this sense it parallels the doctoral viva in the UK. There are therefore resonances between the doctoral viva in the UK and Master viva in Norway. Further reflections on the choice of an academic viva are provided in the section on generalisation, later in this chapter.

In Chapter 3, three levels of theorisation were examined, the existential, the level of social practices and the functional. In broad terms, the first looks at the personal, the second at group processes, and the last at the societal level or the level of the exam as a whole. Selecting a focus on the intermediate level, namely, the one concerned with the level of social practices, the argument is that it is still possible to obtain insights and illuminate the societal and personal aspects of the viva, highlighting where and when they are relevant and exert an influence.

At first sight, choosing social practices of the viva as the level of research represents a move away from understanding the truth of the viva as being plural and many faceted. However, the goal is not to argue that the approach developed in this chapter seeks to pave the way to disclosing the single truth of the viva. Instead, the methodology developed is only one of several possible ones, and it is conceivable that a policy documents approach, as practised by Tinkler and Jackson (2000) also has some advantages, if the goal is policy evaluation and development.

## **Qualitative research**

The starting point for a methodology seeking to understand how the viva is talked into being is not the collection and analysis of policy documents on the viva. The starting point is the talk, which is taking place before (pre-viva examiner meeting), during and after the viva (post-viva examiner meeting). Accordingly, how to collect and analyse the talk connected with the viva is the topic of the remainder of this chapter. However it must be immediately noted, the focus is wider than merely talk, it includes the ‘representation of social life’ (Ragin, quoted in Have, 1999: 28). This representation seeks to reveal how the viva is a form of social interaction, more specifically a social practice that is ordered and to some extent predictable because of its institutionalised character. The focus is thus upon ‘sense making practices’, where even though it is institutionalised, ‘the locus of order is the situated work of the interactants themselves rather than abstract or disembodied rules’ (Clayman and Maynard, 1995: 17). Social practices in such a perspective are contingent. As Garfinkel put it with an emphasis on the social ordering of the social by participants:

In exactly the way that persons are members of organized affairs, they are engaged in serious and practical work of detecting, demonstrating, persuading through displays in the ordinary occasions of their interactions the appearances of consistent, coherent, clear, chosen planful arrangements. In exactly the ways in which a setting is organised, it consists of methods whereby its members are provided with accounts of the setting as countable, storyable, proverbial, comparable, picturable, representable – i.e., accountable (Garfinkel, 1986: 323).

The goal in this research is to observe the viva as it occurs naturally, not to follow the example of early research in the USA during the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, where students were asked to carry out vivas on other students in an experimental situation (Barnes and Pressey, 1929). In other words, naturalism, rather than experimentalism is the goal (see earlier points on the metaphysics of presence).

Moreover, the early research was quantitative and looked to reveal the attributes of examiners, and if they differed significantly between examiner committees; what is termed co-variation. Such research relied upon observing a large number of cases and noting examiner behaviour on a check-list. The research in this dissertation is more qualitative and instead of a check-list of behaviour attributes pre-defined in deductive manner, the intention is to look in detail at patterns and categories that are generated in a more inductive manner. The goal is to identify 'the commonalities that exist across a relatively small number of cases' (Ragin, 1994: 48-50).

Having said this, the research is not absolutely inductive in the sense of treating data 'in an unmotivated way' (Sacks, 1984: 27). Before gathering data, I had a number of 'hunches' based upon research literature on the viva, some of which was reviewed in Part I; for example, how do examiners use either explicitly or implicitly shared constructs when examining? (Messick, 1989). Since 1991, I have been an examiner on both under-graduate and post-graduate vivas (in Education and Sociology). In some years I have examined a large number of vivas. For example in 2005, I examined 64 vivas and 75 the following year. Reflection upon these steadily accumulated experiences proved a source of hunches<sup>30</sup>. Here are a few of them: the need for examiners to be fresh and in good spirits, unlike at the end of a long day of examining; the pairs of examiners in each committee must trust, and feel relaxed with each other; examiners sometimes have their own agendas, and want candidates to "play-up" to their knowledge; and finally, the viva seems to follow a narrative trajectory of a beginning, middle and end, although it can be disrupted by participants and their talk. Hunches such as these motivated my research in the direction of the viva as a source of social practices.

The resultant mix of induction and deduction echoes what Peirce called abduction and by this meant, the opportunity of 'theory, after the most careful and judicious reflection in such a way as to render it more rational or closer to the observed fact'

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<sup>30</sup> It is not the place to undertake a phenomenological reflection on the role of hunches, but if this was the goal then inspiration might be sought from Benjamin's conception of dialectical images to energise thinking (Dobson, 2009), or Peirce's point that 'the idea of putting together what we had never before dreamed of putting together which flashes the new suggestion before our

(Peirce, 1955)<sup>31</sup>. Peirce, along with Glaser and Strauss (1967) in their classic formulation of grounded theory, contended that theory generation and its modification can, and should take place simultaneously with its continuous collection. For them, the researcher should desire to attain a ‘best-fit’ between the theory and empirical data, as mediated by categories. In the research for this dissertation, the theory generation took place retrospectively, after the data had been gathered, and entailed revisiting the collected data to look for categories, or more specifically examiner constructs and narratives, and their confirmation.

### **Technology, filming and ethical issues**

It must be noted at the outset, that focusing on talk alone is not enough. If only sound recordings of vivas were collected, this would provide little indication of how the talked component of the viva was co-ordinated with corporeal movements. Heath and Hindmarsh (2002: 104) have directed attention to this in their research on doctors communicating with patients:

Talk and bodily conduct are social actions and are the primary vehicles through which people accomplish social activities (...) The sense and significance of social actions and activities are inseparable from the immediate context (...) Participants use and rely upon practices, procedures and reasoning, in short ‘methodological resources’, through which they produce social actions and make sense of the actions of others.

In a later work Heath (2004: 269) replaced the term procedures with competencies. This is possibly an admission that ‘procedures’ are made redundant by the term practices; and competencies makes a clearer reference to the kind of knowledge and skills drawn upon by actors. For this reason, it has been an ambition in this research to film the viva and the examiner meetings that immediately precede and follow the viva, as well as interviewing participants (interview guides no. 1 and 2 in appendix I).

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contemplation’ (Peirce quoted in Årsvoll, 2008: 71). It is a question of not only lightning flashes, but also of articulating and making explicit what was tacit and taken for granted.

<sup>31</sup> As Årsvoll (2008: 70-71) has contended, this is not to mean that Peirce discounted the role of surprise, novelty and doubt in the research process.

The inclusion of the pre-viva examiner meeting and its post-viva counterpart is important because the pre-viva meeting prepares the ground for the following viva, and the post-viva meeting draws together and evaluates what has taken place in the viva. Put in phenomenological terms, the past of the pre-viva stretches into the viva, and onwards into the post-viva. The three phases form a single, shared horizon of consciousness, which the participants can keep in mind at all times; taking experiences from one phase into a successive phase, and anticipating experiences before they occur. The continuities and discontinuities between phases were explored in the analysis of each viva.

The horizon of consciousness was even longer, reaching beyond the examiner meetings on the day of the viva, to include the examiners making their preparations and pre-viva examiner judgments individually. They may even have consulted each other so the horizon of consciousness might have been shared prior to, or after the examiner meetings. I found no examples of this in my research. In Norwegian doctorates by way of contrast, it is common for examiners to meet, either in person or in a telephone conference, before the final common recommendation on the dissertation is written. This recommendation decides if the candidate's work is considered worthy of defence in a public disputation.

Preparations for the pre-viva meeting were examined in this research, in the sense that examiners were interviewed prior to the day of the viva in a more general interview with open questions (interview guide no. 1 in Appendix I). This covered their experiences of the viva and what they try to do when examining or preparing to examine (e.g. some examiners only read the dissertation in the days immediately preceding the viva, while others read it some weeks earlier). Likewise, examiners were asked fairly general questions some period after the viva (interview guide no.2 in Appendix I). One interview question asked if the camera had been experienced as a disturbance <sup>32</sup>.

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<sup>32</sup> It is important not to exaggerate the value of the interviews and their contribution towards the validation of interpretations of events. There are occasions when the descriptions of social phenomena by interactants are 'demonstrably flawed' (Nelson, 1994: 311) and do not correspond to the truth of the event outside of the telling (Back, 2007: 164). For 'radical postmodernists', the interview is a reality in itself and cannot claim to provide 'a "means of access" to something that lies behind or beyond it (Wilkinson, 1997: 187).' My view has been that an 'affirmative post-modern' perspective can be defended (Gulrium and Holstein, 2003), where a commitment to an objectivist description of reality is retained, while admitting at the same time, its dependence on a reflexive awareness of language, its limits and the different rhetorical forms it can take. For

Lomax and Casey (1998) argued that the presence of the camera necessarily influenced the filmed interaction, such that participants turned to the camera and made reference to its presence. To believe that after a while the camera was ignored, was, in their opinion, a mistake. Munthe (2005) in her review of videographic educational research also noted the dangers of the camera influencing interaction. In the pre-viva meeting of one of the filmed viva, the supervisor and external examiner discussed the positioning of the candidate, so that all would be equally visible to the camera. This suggested an awareness of the camera's presence and role and that it had not become a natural part of the environment (Have, 1999: 73). Nevertheless, the open, critical tone of their comments in this particular viva, especially during pre and post-viva meetings suggested that the participants had not modified their behaviour because they feared having to later defend questionable, or controversial statements and judgments caught on film. In the interview of one of the examiners after the viva, the following exchange took place:

Do you think the camera influenced any of you?

Why should it? It just stands there.<sup>33</sup>

In another filmed viva, an examiner spoke in a somewhat sarcastic tone and directed the candidate to the presence of the camera half-way through the viva.

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example, in one of the filmed pre-viva meetings, both the examiners confessed to the supervisor that they lacked a rudimentary understanding of phenomenology, and this was the central theoretical approach in the candidate's dissertation. Reminded of this lacuna in a post-event interview, on re-viewing the relevant clusters, it is possible that the examiners would have been embarrassed and tried to find a way of 'saving face'. They might have downplayed the importance of insight into phenomenology and argued that it played no role in the grading cluster, when the opposite was actually the case. Or, take a slightly different example: in Case II in Chapter 7 of this dissertation there was evidence of participants in the focus group after individual vivas making assertions that didn't match what was observable on re-examining the filmed vivas. With these points in mind, analysing the vivas rested predominantly upon using different concepts (e.g. language games, narratives and conversation analysis – introduced later in the chapter), rather than upon a weighting towards what might be post-event rationalizations/'saving face' strategies by the participants in interviews.

Moreover, downplaying the post-event interviews faces on the other hand, the risk of excluding the voice of the participants in the analysis and interpretation of the data. This is something discussed in a forthcoming paper comparing four different qualitative models in the interpretation of video data: narratology, epiphanies, conversation/corporeal, and lastly, the shared images/meaning developed when research and informant re-review the filmed data. (Dobson, Sørby and Zacheriassen, 2009).

<sup>33</sup> Tror du kamera påvirket noen av dere?  
Hvorfor det? Kamera bare står der



The candidate in interview after the viva mentioned that she at the time had been irritated, but not unduly affected, by the behaviour of the examiner.

Only an examination of the filmed data collected for each viva, along with interviews, can determine if and how the camera has influenced participants. Such a case-by-case method is an important way of determining the role of technology as a possible source of data bias in this research.

My general ethical standpoint has been that informants should not be injured in any manner by the collection or publication of the research. Such an ethical standpoint, rooted in a consequence ethic <sup>34</sup>, is important because firstly, the filmed data might potentially have been shown in such a manner that participants were identifiable or publicly embarrassed by their statements. Secondly, if the filming had been covert this would have meant that access had been obtained to what is all too often a secretive and privatised activity. Yet at the same time, rooted in an ethical view that the researcher should be publicly accountable, the right of participants to know that they were being researched would have been denied. <sup>35</sup> In this dissertation, all filmed participants agreed in voluntary fashion to be filmed. Accordingly the camera was visible to all participants.

On a formal level, permission for the filming of the viva was obtained, as is the rule in all social science research in Norway, after a successful application to the Norwegian State Data Services (*Norsk Data Tjeneste*). They required that the data collected was stored on a computer that was only accessed by the researcher and that the rights of the informants were protected by keeping them anonymous in the final printed version of the research.

Respecting the right of examiners and candidates to refuse being filmed, is an important ethical consideration. Refusals in the research process were encountered, and the arguments used by potential participants to justify their decisions were of interest and noted for further analysis. One candidate prior to

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<sup>34</sup> While the consequence ethic contains elements of a social responsibility ethic, through its concern with inter-personal relations, my position is not that of a duty or mind (intention and motivation) ethics (Befring, 2007: 55)

her viva was prepared to be interviewed, but not filmed, and gave the following reason for not wanting to be filmed:

I am afraid that filming will influence the examiners. (3.0) don't misunderstand me your research is important (2.0) but I have to think about how my future career is at stake.

In this example, the informant was thinking strategically in terms of the social consequences of the viva, and to respect her wishes, this particular viva was not filmed or observed by the researcher. Examining refusals also contributes to an understanding of the viva, in the sense that the refusals provide a heightened understanding of the issues at stake in the filmed viva.

### **Selecting cases and the issue of generalisation**

How many vivas should have been filmed? As argued above, the research was qualitative rather than quantitative, so the goal was not to film a great number of vivas. Instead, the goal was to undertake detailed study of a limited number of cases.

Permission was obtained to film four Master in Education vivas (one from the pool of seven took who took this master viva in 2004, three from the six who took this master viva in 2005), and five undergraduate education vivas (from a pool of 13 taking the advanced course that year; year II of a BA) in a Norwegian University College. 8 group and 31 individual Travel and Tourism vivas <sup>36</sup> at the end of the first semester in a BA program at the same college were also observed, rather than filmed. Questions asked and answers given in the observed instances of the viva were noted as they took place. Despite the relatively limited number of vivas, it is possible, as I shall argue below, and in Chapter 7, to look at the differences and similarities between the post-graduate and under-graduate vivas, and between different under-graduate vivas. Connected to these vivas, were a number of interviews with participants, and one focus group with students who

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<sup>35</sup> A consequence ethic draws upon Bentham's understanding of the costs and benefits of action. A publicly accountable view of ethics is inspired by Arendt's view that action should always be open to informed, critical debate (Nerheim, 1991).

took individual vivas in the advanced course (interview guide no. 2, Appendix I). The focus group is useful because it allows respondents to react to each others' responses (Wilkinson, 1997). A number (16) of more general interviews (interview guide no. 1 in Appendix I) with a wider pool of Norwegian academics were undertaken to provide background insight into examiner experiences of the viva. The 16 were randomly drawn from the same university college in which the filmed vivas took place and from external examiners in Education, Philosophy and Sociology. The filmed vivas were most extensively researched, especially since the filmed vivas could be re-viewed.

All the vivas were of an academic character. Professional vivas in social work or nursing programs, for example, were not researched. If they had been included as instances across type, it would have been hard to generalise to academic vivas because they are more concerned with questioning performance and reflecting upon own experiences of performance. Secondly, the education vivas explored in Part II of this dissertation, did not seek to guarantee entry into the teaching profession. As a consequence they were academic vivas without the focal point of professional performance and certification. A stronger case can be made for generalising the academic viva of this dissertation with academic vivas held elsewhere in Scandinavia and the world in general (in-type instances), especially when it is understood that they shared not only the question and answer format, but a focus upon a previously submitted dissertation. And even though the dissertation in the academic viva might deal with the concerns of the field of practice (e.g. teaching in schools), it would not have the candidate's own experiences of practice as a focal point.

Nevertheless, there is an alternative line of argumentation, which seeks to justify the generalisation of the vivas researched. This is one based upon the view that the vivas researched were cases. This is not, it must be added, to argue for the unique characteristics of each case, and a consequent neglect of patterns and similarities between cases.

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<sup>36</sup> There were 77 students taking the BA in Travel and Tourism in 2004.

Bassey (1999:24) has defined a case as 'the study of the instance in action' or 'study of a bounded system' that can be investigated because it is delimited with clear parameters determining what does and does not belong to the case. The vivas examined in this research, are, by this definition, cases of instances in action because they are filmed or observed as they actually take place. This is in opposition to a research strategy that is based solely upon the interview of participants in the viva, where insight into the research object (viva) is a post-event reflection upon action and distanced from the action itself.

Moreover, it is possible to argue that each of the vivas in this piece of research constitute cases in the sense that they are bounded systems. This is because they have a starting point in the examiner meetings prior to the viva and an end point when the final grade is announced to the candidate. Earlier, it was contended that the horizon of the examiner's consciousness stretched before the pre-viva examiner meeting and after the post-viva examiner meeting. This would seem to suggest that the viva was not such a clearly bounded system with some of its component parts reaching beyond it. However, it is still the start and cut-off points of the examiners' meetings that orientate and determine the relevance of 'examiner consciousness' before, or after the day of the viva. In other words, it is the boundaries marked by the examiners' meetings for each particular viva that make it possible to regard each viva as a bounded system.

Bassey (1999: 31-34) has also argued that when the object of study is a case study or a limited number of cases, then statistical generalisation is not the goal, as is the aim in much quantitative research with its desire to make predictive assertions. Instead the goal is an analytical generalisation, such that in the analysis of the cases the concepts identified or theories developed create a template that can be generalised and also modified as each case is examined in turn. As Yin stated (quoted in Bassey, 1999: 31), 'if two or more cases are shown to support the same theory, replication may be claimed'. In other words, it is not the empirical data that is generalised, but the theoretical or conceptual apparatus (Yin, 2003: 10)<sup>37</sup>.

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<sup>37</sup> The concept of specimen adds an extra dimension to the understanding of the term 'case study'. A specimen approach is different to one in which the researcher adopts a *factist* perspective. The latter is typical of the questionnaire and interview methodologies when a number of assumptions are made. Firstly, the words used by the interviewer and informant are about the world out there (e.g. the viva). Secondly, the informant's statements are presumed to be a true reflection of this reality. What of the specimen perspective?

After the viva had been filmed and observed, and the data had been collected and analysed, the next step was to look at how it might be possible to develop a theoretical set of concepts to account for what had been going on in the viva. This, in the terms of Bassey, is the point when the goal becomes analytical generalisation through theoretical concepts.

An issue that has to be considered in the case study approach is how, and by what criteria the selected cases are 'good' and not merely 'satisfactory' instances or bounded systems of the viva, and are therefore deserving of detailed research. Bassey might contend that a good case is simply one that is an instance of an action or a bounded system. It might be argued in addition, that a good case is one in which certain necessary dimensions of a viva are present. For example, a viva in which the examiners do most of the speaking and provide little opportunity for the candidate to reply, makes it harder for the candidate to demonstrate that they can reason consistently over a period of time. Similarly, a viva interrupted by the noise of builders working outside the window, might disturb the settled atmosphere and behaviour of the participants. In the first example, we are dealing

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A specimen as a form of research material is not treated as either a statement about or a reflection of reality; instead, a specimen is seen as part of the reality being studied. Therefore honesty is an irrelevant concept to be used in assessing the material. A specimen may be badly representative of the whole, or it may be technically bad, but it cannot lie (Alasuutari, quoted by Have, 1999: 38).

In this research on the viva, while some interviews were conducted, the main emphasis was upon the filmed data and what was said in the viva as it was taking place. And if Alasuutari's point is taken on board, then it is no longer necessary to ask about the truth-value of the filmed data. It was valid because it is an instance of the activity in action. On the other hand, with data triangulation in mind it might still be necessary to ask about the motives of those interviewed and the truthfulness of their statements (e.g. are they saying what they think is expected of them). This form of truthfulness can be assessed by comparing their statements with other interviewed participants. Triangulation is also possible in a different sense, by examining the extent to which what the examiners in the pre-viva examiner meeting agree to ask in the viva, is actually asked, and if it has any significance for the post-viva examiner meeting when the final grade is determined. I have been interested in this second form of triangulation. The first form of triangulation, measuring the truth of one participant's statements against those of another, opens up the problem of deciding whose version is correct or incorrect and why.

Other forms of triangulation, besides data triangulation might also be relevant. Researcher triangulation entails different researchers looking at the data and conclusions drawn from its interpretation. This has not been undertaken in a systematic manner in the sense of regular data sessions to arrive at shared interpretations. Some extracts of the collected data have been shared and interpreted e.g. on examiners negotiating the grade. The findings have been discussed with assessment researcher colleagues (Engh and Hoihilder, see acknowledgments) and versions of Chapter 4 and 5 have been anonymously refereed, reworked and accepted for journal publication<sup>37</sup>. The findings from this dissertation are also triangulated through comparison with the work of Trafford and Leshem (see point d. in Chapter 8).

with the danger of construct under-representation (Messick, 1989:34), as the desired construct (e.g. cognitive reasoning in a deductive manner) is under-represented. In the second example, there is a danger of what Messick has called construct irrelevance, as the candidate's ability to talk loudly and without losing concentration is judged.

When Heritage (quoted in Have, 1999: 38) argued that the case study researcher should seek to build up 'a good collection of naturalist's specimens', whereby 'analysts constantly seek for new variants and may focus their searches on particular settings in the expectation of finding them', he was not attempting to assert, as I did in the paragraph above, that there might exist a pre-defined and agreed set of criteria determining good cases. The implication of Heritage's point is clear, and requires a revision of my position: the attempt to define in advance what is a good case risks fixing the boundaries of a good case and unnecessarily excluding interesting cases. It is better to constantly seek 'new variants', which means in turn that all cases of academic viva are potentially worthy of study and if construct irrelevance or under-representation is identified, then this must be a characteristic of the particular case under examination. The proviso being that analytical generalisation has been sought as new variants are compared with already examined cases.

### **Conversation analysis**

It is possible to undertake a quantitative analysis of observed interaction using for example a modified Classroom Assessment Scoring System (LaParo *et al.*, 2002) manual which scores the content and prevalence of certain items, such as emotional climate (e.g. enthusiasm, receptiveness). I have broken with this videographic tradition and followed a more qualitative approach concerned with identifying the different language games and forms of life, read social practices, found in the data. This is in the tradition of discourse analysis.

For Wittgenstein (1994), an infinite number and kind of language games existed, including questioning, promising, praising, demonstrating, refuting and so on. Nevertheless, it is possible to examine each viva in turn and to identify which language games are used and repeated in different vivas. If repeated, the

implication is that the language game and the social practice supporting it are stable. But how are these language games manifested in material fashion by the participants talking-in-interaction? Or put differently, 'how is it that the thing comes off?' (Sacks, 1995: 11. Vol. I) Is it through the use of language games in a social practice? To answer this question, an argument will be made that two methodological tools can be combined and developed along with language games: conversation analysis and narratology. The former highlights talk-in-interaction, the latter the manner in which meaning is constructed, drawing upon intrinsic and extrinsic resources.<sup>38</sup>

Conversation analysis, as presented by Have (1999), is in a broad sense united by looking at a number of events in a piece of talked interaction; it can be formalised talk-in-interaction in an institutional setting, or informal talk-in-interaction, as between people 'passing the time of day' as they wait to enter a room for a viva.<sup>39</sup> The 'talked into being' event makes use of turn-taking, sequence organisation and repair of conversation. In addition, conversation analysis generates insights into how the viva begins, and is terminated.

In the filmed viva, a candidate's turn was initiated by one of the examiners asking a question and when the answer had been given, a slight pause might indicate to the examiners that the candidate was ready to hand over the turn. As Sack put it (1972: 343):

A person who has asked a question can talk again, has, as we may put it, 'a reserved right to talk again,' after the one to whom he has addressed the question speaks. And, in using the reserved right he can ask a question.

Turn taking for conversation analysts is a 'prominent type of social organisation'; providing insight into how orderliness is produced across different forms of talked activity, such that turns are allocated 'one turn at a time' or pre-allocated (Sacks,

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<sup>38</sup> It is possible to find in conversation analysis an awareness of Wittgenstein's understanding of the language game, but it is more generative and close to talked interaction than the single sentence analysis of speech acts found in the work of Austin and Searle. See Schegloff (1996: 112)

<sup>39</sup> Some conversation analysts prefer the term talk-in-interaction, instead of the term conversation analysis for their activity because they are interested in institutionalised talk and not just informal mundane conversation (Drew and Heritage, 1992: 4).

Schegloff and Jefferson, 1978: 7, 46). It might also be anticipated that at certain points in a viva, turn taking might lose its clarity and overlapping between participants occurs (Schegloff, Ochs and Thompson, 1996: 31). Turn taking also describes the manner in which earlier parts of turn constructional units ‘adumbrate, foreshadow, or project aspects of possible later productions’ and the *projection space*, is ‘the span in which some element of talk is “in play” before being produced’ (Schegloff, 1984: 267).

Sequence organisation has been called the idea that ‘one thing leads to another’ (Have, 1999: 113), as in a question placed adjacently in a pair with an answer, or an offer demanding an acceptance or refusal. Sacks (1978: 252) has elaborated that there is a difference between temporal organisation, ‘an order which might be seen to be directly preserving the temporal format of the events it reports’, and sequential organisation ‘such that an appreciation of some point in it turns on an appreciation of its position as subsequent to some other point.’ In other words, the sequential need not repeat or copy the temporal of events recounted. Sacks is of the opinion that the temporal and sequential can draw upon each other and become intertwined, for instance, in the course of telling a joke.

However, there is a problem with the concept of sequence organisation as conceived by several conversation analysts. When understood as adjacency pairs, it seems to control turn taking, such that question ‘initial elicitors produce a constraint system for the next turn’ (Button and Casey, 1984: 177), and in this sense become more an aspect of turn taking, than a separate co-ordinating event or characteristic in a piece of conversation. Button’s (1992) exploration of the job interview, similar to the viva with its emphasis on questions and answers, is a case in point. Button, while noting ‘the organisation of the interview as a turn-taking system’, lacks a higher level of conceptual elaboration to account for the grouping of questions and answers in a sequence. In a similar manner, Sacks (1972: 343), while talking of a *chaining rule* and how this makes it possible to generate ‘an indefinitely long conversation of the form Q-A-Q-A-Q-A’, fails in the particular



paper quoted to conceptualise a motif to indicate how different chains may be grouped or differentiated in the case of a single conversation.<sup>40</sup>

For this reason, in this dissertation sequence organisation is defined as a block, group or cluster of questions and answers (or other language games), identifiable and organised around a topic. Have (1999: 178) uses the term 'questioning chunks'. The point is that question and answer pairs are organised and arranged at a higher level by the topic that clusters the questions and answers together. Thus, in the viva the several questions and answers on the methodology used by the candidate are a cluster, just as there is a cluster on the findings of the dissertation and so on. The connection of topics or clusters to each other also becomes something that must be studied. Sacks' (1995: 566. Vol. II) reflection that a move of topic 'involves connecting what we've just been talking about to what we're now talking about' provides some insight into this issue and directs attention to what he calls *topic markers* in talk (Sacks, 1995: 254. Vol. II). His insights can be usefully combined with the view explored later in this chapter; namely, that participants construct narratives to manage the flow and movement between topics or clusters.

It must be noted that the question and answer format of some sequences represents a specific type of language game (interrogative), just as the candidate summing up his or her dissertation at the beginning of the viva, is a different type of language game; one that might be called a report, as it seeks by denotative means to describe, and also prove by assertions, the truth content of its knowledge (Lyotard, 1986: 20). The grading cluster is a norm-generating component of the viva viewed as a social practice. It entails an evaluative language game as a judgment on the candidate is reached. And, it must also be anticipated that a single cluster can include one or more language games, or that language games merge and cease to be clearly distinguishable.

Examples of repairs to the conversation can be found in the viva. Such as the awkward silence when the grade of D was announced and the candidate was

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<sup>40</sup> Sacks (1995) explores this in some of his lectures, where he introduces three levels of conversation organisation: adjacency pair, topic and overall structure (vol. II, 561-570); and the 'stepwise movement of topics' with chains of similarity between two topics (Vol. II, 300-301).

clearly disappointed. Repair of the conversation was required by examiners, who might have already anticipated 'a harbinger of trouble ahead' in the examiner meetings (Schegloff, 1984: 268). In the question and answer language game, repair was also identified as examiners re-phrased a question to elicit a response. This concurs with Pomerantz's (1984: 153) observation:

Clarifying, reviewing the assumed common knowledge, and modifying one's position are ways that speakers pursue responses. The success of these pursuits lies in whether the recipients subsequently voice their agreements and disagreements to the speakers' assertions.

Moreover, it is necessary to not only look at the words to start or bring the viva to a close, but also the preparatory words and phrases. For example, in the filmed viva, the candidates were often asked to begin the viva by giving a brief resumé of their dissertation as a preparation for the questions to follow.

Drew and Heritage (1992: 49) are of the opinion that asymmetrical power relations between participants and the status attached to these role based relations are a necessary part of institutionalised talk-in-interaction. Correspondingly, it is to be expected that the right and obligation to make beginnings and endings in the viva, control turn taking, sequence organisation and repair will be reflected in the differential power and status of the participants. In other words, with turn-taking, sequence organisation, repair of the conversation and making beginnings and endings as the building blocks used by participants to construct the viva, it becomes possible to say something of the power relations generated by the participants and their institutionalised positions. Accordingly, power is not an object or a thing, it is embedded in social relations and how the viva is talked into being.

Earlier in the dissertation, I contended that power was located in the narratives voiced by participants, such that a candidate might turn the table on an examiner through the voicing of a narrative they had not expected. To re-phrase, roles permit the voicing of specific narratives, but the narratives can be countered by other narratives, and the power embedded in roles disrupted or threatened. When

this occurs, it becomes apparent that power rests with the narratives and not the role, as we commonly think. As such, when the concept of narrative is evoked, it would be wrong to totally disregard the view of power institutionalised in assigned roles, but wise to question and place a limit on its relevance.

Conversation analysis can be criticised for tending to ignore the influence of macro-sociological variables such as the socio-cultural and economic status, gender, age and ethnic background of viva participants. In defence, it can be argued that these kinds of things, as well as roles (e.g. examiner and candidate), should not be taken as pre-givens but instead, only considered when talked into being. For example, in one of the viva, when the candidate apologised for his poor Norwegian, even though he was Swedish and had lived in Norway for over three decades, it was important to explore the role of his ethnic background in influencing the outcome of the viva. In this particular instance the candidate's Norwegian was not commented upon by the examiners in the pre or post-viva examiner meetings.

A similar criticism has been made by Moerman (1988:22). He argues that knowledge of the background culture and the taken for granted knowledge of the participants is needed to understand the meanings and analyse the interaction – because as he says: ‘we never merely exchange turns of talk. In all conversation, people are living their lives, performing their roles, enacting their culture’. Moerman's point is that these things provide an insight into the intentions and motives of participants. However, I remain skeptical about over-emphasising participants' post-event commentaries on their talk, communicated in interviews, as the sole form of insight into intentions and motives. This is because they might lead to post-event rationalisations and justifications that don't necessarily possess legitimacy outside of the telling in the interview. Such a view can have knock-on effects about the relevance of the interview in analysing the viva as it was talked-into-being. My point in the present context is not to revert to the argument that the interview could or should be the primary way of moving beyond the ‘data-is-enough’ perspective. Instead, I shall argue below that other additional perspectives (e.g. sociological, ethnomethodological, temporal and narrative-based) can usefully be included to deepen the analysis of the filmed data as more

than just talk. Some of these perspectives make use of the talk of the participants in the vivas, or in interviews.

The criticism of the 'data is enough' view of conversation analysis, focuses on how conversation analysis tends to treat individual cases as instances, when participants use context independent devices, organisations and machineries, such as turn taking, without making them 'context-bound' (Schegloff, 1984a: 52; Drew and Heritage, 1992: 25-26; Sacks, Schegloff, Jefferson, 1978). What is required, as ethnomethodologists argue, is more detailed knowledge of the competencies used by participants and their connection with specific places and activities. Elaborating on this Heath (1997), has argued that extensive fieldwork is necessary to see how artifacts are used and how organisational factors are created to support and make a frame for the conversation analysis.

The basic point, and one with which I concur, is that conversation analysis on its own is not enough (Titscher *et al.*, 2000). It is necessary to adopt a more sociological, ethnomethodological and temporal position in addition to one based upon conversation analysis. The sociological is understood in terms of a focus on the socio-cultural, socio-economic and socio-political contexts supporting and influencing particular cases filmed. For example, in considering the socio-political uncertainty of the future of the viva, its future would appear to rest in the hands of the government's education policy makers, who in turn are concerned with its cost-effectiveness compared with other forms of assessment. The socio-cultural for example, is the manner in which new examiners are socialised into a way of examining by experienced examiners, the socio-cultural character of the institution in which the viva is held (e.g. a long tradition of holding viva) and also the role of gender, age, ethnic and socio-economic background of participants (e.g. when seen as relevant by the researcher or participants)<sup>41</sup>.

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<sup>41</sup> Socio-economic background is a difficult concept at the best of times, and can refer to the social class of participants. From a Bernstein (2004) perspective this might include the distinction between working and middle classes and how they express themselves differently in terms of lexical and syntactic codes. This parallels Bourdieu (1996) in his understanding of different forms of cultural, social and economic capital possessed by different socio-economic classes and how it accounts for what they say and how. Maguire (2005) provides the example of accent, class and teaching.

The ethnomethodological focuses upon the common sense, taken for granted reasoning of participants, as a contextual background for their embodied performances in the viva.<sup>42</sup> An example of how this common sense reasoning was developed prior to the filmed viva, was shown by candidates and also examiners who had had earlier experiences of the viva in their under-graduate degrees and in high school. These experiences had taught them to reason in what appeared to be a 'taken-for-granted' rational manner, such that they knew what was expected of them in the viva. This reasoning was also revealed when the regular flow of the talked interaction was disrupted. For example on one occasion in a pre-viva examiner meeting, participants asked each other if they were following the formal, written rules on grading, laid down by the college. In questioning their own interpretations, 'evidences-of-a-social-order' were being shared and recognised not merely through the substantive content of the rules, but through various social methods of reasoning (e.g. 'detecting, demonstrating, persuading') being shared as these rules were examined (Garfinkel, 1986: 320-323). Thus, the 'how' a person was speaking became as important as the 'what' was said, and therefore 'rules serve not as causal agents in the determination of action but as resources that members use when making sense of action' (Clayman and Maynard, 1995: 16).

A wider temporal reach is required. As Peräkylä (1997) has noted, tape-recorded or filmed data, may be of only one episode, and the medium, or longer term temporal processes may be lacking. For this reason, as already noted, not only has the viva been filmed, but also the pre-viva and post-viva examiner meetings, and interviews have been carried out with participants prior to, and after the viva.

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<sup>42</sup> This is close to Schutz's earlier view that the social scientist is interested in the typical mental constructs ('syntheses, generalizations, formalizations, idealizations specific to the respective level of thought organization') and common sense reasoning used by the actor, and additionally how the social scientist develops their own mental constructs, which are at a distance from the world of the actor and of a different second order (Schutz, 1962: 36). The term 'typical' suggests generalization to how other actors doing the same activity will use the same psychological construct. In other words, the move is made from the singular instance to a higher analytical level permitting comparison between different instances of the phenomenon.

Accordingly, the first stage in the analysis of the filmed viva is to consider the following:

- mapping the relevance of socio-cultural, socio-political and socio-economic contextual factors.
- identifying common sense reasoning held by the participants. This can draw upon their prior experiences of the viva and opinions of assessment in the viva.

The ethnic, gender, age and socio-economic background of participants might be considered as part of the first stage, but are studied further in the second stage, if highlighted and considered relevant by participants. In the second stage of the analysis, the filmed viva are examined with a focus on:

- turn taking, sequential organisation, conversation repair, beginning and terminating the viva, and how different participants are adept at using these things
- identification of language games (e.g. question and answer, report, greetings...etc)
- co-ordination (or its lack) of the talk with corporal movements, material structure and tools.

With respect to the last mentioned, it is possible to distinguish three elements and how they are or are not aligned with talk (Goodwin, 1984; Goodwin and Goodwin, 1996). Firstly, bodily movements which includes the bodily direction of the participants (towards/away from others) and how these change with talk, nods, sighs, laughter and the use of arms (e.g. movements to include, refuse or confirm a phrase uttered). Hand gestures, to take an example, tend to be 'organized, at least in part, by reference to the talk in the course of which they are produced'. They can also, along with facial expressions and posture, 'tell the story into which the words are dropped' (Schegloff, 1984: 273, 291). In psychological research an attempt is sometimes made to measure the duration of eye contact in seconds. No such attempt was made in this research, since it is difficult to thereafter interpret the significance of changes in the duration. If a person's talk fails to gain a response (e.g. the hearer is not orientated towards the speaker), repair of the

conversation may be instigated to gain or re-gain the participation of the other and ensure their response (Goodwin, 1996: 374).

Secondly, the material structure of each viva can be identified. By this it is meant the character of the room (e.g. was it impersonal and lacking pictures or images on the wall). Did it contain windows? Was it well lit? How were the candidate and other participants positioned around the table (e.g. all around a circular table, or with the candidate on one side of a square table) and if the examiners had discussed this beforehand? The material structure is important because it can exert an influence on the existential state of a candidate and their performance. An impersonal examination room might increase the level of a candidate's anxiety. Alternatively, an inviting room might have a different effect, enabling a candidate to feel more at ease with the viva. Having said this, it can be hard to determine if the candidate felt more relaxed by a certain room, and if there was a necessary causal or direct connection between the soft 'feel' of a room, the relaxed emotional state of the candidate and their performance in the viva. This suggests that the role of the material structure can be outlined, and also what kind of emotional state of mind might be expected. But, to identify the precise emotional state of mind of the candidate it supports, reveals or causes, is harder to elucidate.

Thirdly, the co-ordination of talk with tools entails such things as the use of the dissertation by participants (e.g. do participants refer to specific pages and read them in the viva), refreshments (provided and displayed, or candidate has his/her own), official documents (with guidelines on grades or to be signed by examiners), writing instruments placed on the table and sometimes used. Looking at clocks and making reference to the time is potentially an action that requires turning the head and could therefore be recorded as a bodily movement.

Considered in such a manner, the social practice of the viva is what Goodwin (1996: 371) has called an *interactive activity*, where talk, body movement, tools and material structures are drawn upon differentially by participants to produce a 'coherent course of collaborative action'.

## **Narratology**

With two stages of analysis of the filmed viva completed (see triangle figure at the beginning of the chapter), a question remains:

How do participants ensure that meaningful connections are established between the different phases within the viva (e.g. beginning, middle and end) and between the pre-viva examiner meetings, the viva and the post-viva meeting?

Phrased differently,

How are the different clusters and sequences connected, such that a red thread – or several red threads – make the event into a comprehensible whole for participants?

To answer this question and to also research it, it is necessary to ‘jump the gun’ and begin theorising the viva. My assertion is that actors use their narrative competence (Dobson, 2005) to construct narratives connecting parts of the viva together and also connecting the pre-viva examiner meeting, to the viva and the post-viva examiner meeting. As a corollary, if a convincing definition of narratives and narrative competence is offered, the accompanying methodological question entails developing a research tool capable of identifying narratives in the filmed viva.

The move to narratology is unsurprising in one respect because it supplies a theory and methodology for concretising how the normative character of social practices take on a material, visible form. Narratives are always normative in the sense that they provide an ordered understanding of social practices, not only in the sense that they can be a post-event account of a social practice, but also in the sense that they can structure a participant’s conception and realisation of a social practice as it unfolds.

But, what is a narrative? The attempt to find a universal, timeless definition of narrative, dates to Aristotle (1965) in *On the Art of Poetry*, where he proposed that



a narrative involved a beginning, middle and end organised in a causal direction so that events are joined together to reveal a plot. Ricoeur, has drawn upon Aristotle's perspective to provide a phenomenological understanding of narrative, connecting it with the experience of time and mimesis. In his words:

Time becomes human time to the extent that it is organized after the manner of a narrative; narrative, in turn, is meaningful to the extent that it portrays the features of temporal existence (Ricoeur, 1984: 3).

Narratives, according to this perspective, are therefore regarded as essentially temporal and temporality can be described and recaptured in narratives of history and fiction. This kind of understanding is circular, as life and narrative mirror each other in a creative mimesis. It also places an emphasis on the necessity of the narrative revealing the ordering of the events in 'a causal sequence' (Ricoeur, 1984: 41).

Ricoeur ignores post-modern and hypertext inspired conceptions of narratives that break with the temporal organisation of the plot in a diachronic beginning-middle-end, and disrupt the direction of causality (Boje, 2001). In my work with refugees I found instances of narratives where a single narrative beginning was unclear or authorship could not be traced to a single origin. Instead narratives were multi-punctual in origin and multi-accented because of the polyphonic presence of several voices (Dobson, 2004: 131-4). It is worth noting that in such cases, causality was not necessarily absent, but multi-accented and/or multi-directional. Multi-directional can be defined as a narrative that proceeds forwards, as well as backwards in search of an origin. An example of this is what Jefferson (1978: 221) has called the *embedded repetition*, whereby a narrative repeats a phrase or a topic from a proceeding conversation or non-verbal event, and the repetition functions as a recall of the trigger that set the narrative in motion. This reversal of the causality means that it is not cause to effect, but an effect or several effects in search of a cause and this becomes the focus of the narrative.

Firstly, these conceptions of narratives, whether rooted in the tradition of Aristotle or the post-modern, share what Czarniawska (2004) has called a desire to move

from the mere description of events to an interest in their emplotment. Secondly, since narratives express sense making in hermeneutic fashion, competing versions are thus possible. Thirdly, these conceptions are based upon the desire to identify narrative rationality in the events examined (Fisher, 1987: 47, 64, 109). By this it is meant that narrative probability is based upon a narrative's coherence ('whether a story "hangs together"') and narrative fidelity (expressing a narrative's credibility based upon 'good reasons'). Good reasons are hard to define *a priori*, as in the debate about good cases referred to above and therefore perhaps it is preferable to say reasons in general.

The conception of narratives proposed in this dissertation draws upon these views to argue that the narratives in filmed vivas are multi-directional, multi-accented and multi-punctual. This means in addition revealing how the narratives are to do with emplotment, sense making and the desire for narrative rationality. In sum, the narratives give the social practice of the viva an ordered and meaningful character, and narrative competence becomes the ability of the participants to create and deal with these different aspects of narratives (Dobson, 2005).

What kinds of narratives are looked for in the analysis of the filmed viva, and how are they to be identified? Broadly speaking two kinds of narratives can be sought: those that I would call intrinsic to the viva, and those that are extrinsic.

Intrinsic narratives for the examiners, depict the manner in which the beginning of the examination is the pre-viva meeting, and this proceeds to the viva as the middle, and finally reaches the post-viva meeting as the end when the final grade is fixed and communicated to the candidate. This is the simple chronological narrative flow of beginning, middle, end, and is mirrored slightly different in the experience of the candidate, who focuses on the examiner's middle part, the viva. For the candidate, the connection of beginning, middle and end is materialised with an opening sequence of greeting and the candidate's overview of their dissertation are joined to clusters of questions and answers; and then later, the closing sequence is added, when the summing up takes place and the candidate is asked to leave the examination room and wait to be re-called to receive the final grade. The plot connecting the different parts for examiners and candidates is the motive that all are united by, namely, the arrival of a final grade. *Slots*, to use a

term introduced by Sacks (1972: 341), are created for the beginning, middle and end, and altogether they represent what conversation analysts call the 'overall structural organisation' of the event (Drew and Heritage, 1992: 44-45).

It is interesting to explore the manner in which this simple intrinsic narrative becomes multi-directional as participants make references to earlier parts. For example, in one of the vivas filmed an examiner kept returning to his view that the candidate had omitted to cover the educational implications of her research. This was an instance of the embedded repetition identified by Jefferson (1978), such that the narrative seemed to move backwards all the time, rather than forward. Ryave, in similar fashion has noted this repetitive aspect calling it the 'significance aspect'. For him, this is an 'idealised assertion' or 'generalized admonition' with moral import. It can also be a maxim, proverb or a rule (Ryave, 1978: 123). It provides reflexive meaning to the 'recounting aspect' of a narrative, such that it appears 'coherent and reasonable' (ibid. 1978: 126). Moreover, the significance aspect connecting two parts of a narrative can be of two types. Either it repeats the significance and is termed same-significance, or it alters the first significance by adding a new interpretation and creating not a same, but similar significance.

Jefferson (1978: 229), underlines how a decision is required by participants as to whether the recalled talk of the intrinsic narrative is to be 'treated as utterly irrelevant to ongoing talk and is sequentially deleted' from the talk that follows, or that the intrinsic narrative based upon the prior talk is to receive a postscript, in which case, its end is postponed as additional components are added. Her main point and this applies to the viva, is that 'more routinely, the relationship of a story to subsequent talk is negotiated between teller and recipients' (ibid. 1978: 229). In other words, the direction of the narrative, recalling or moving forward, is something that participants determine in their ongoing choice of statements.

Moreover, the drive or push towards the final judgment on a grade is multi-accented as the different examiners make differing points. As Goodwin (1984: 232), a conversation analyst would have described it, the viva functions as a 'multiple turn constructional unit' in the sense that several speakers can construct/contribute to the narrative.

The multi-punctual is something to look for when the origin and also different phases of the viva are not pinned to a single statement or moment. This closely parallels the conception of the multi-accented where multiple voices are present and this makes it hard to determine the role of a single voice. To take an example, in one viva observed, but not filmed, the candidate received one cluster of questions from the same examiner, but the cluster included several points of origin. They were traceable to different points in the dissertation. So the multi-punctual origin of the narrative was informed, perhaps even determined, by the different points in the dissertation. Such a multi-punctual conception was to some extent anticipated in Schegloff's (1996: 77, 92) conception of conversation analysis with multiple beginnings, accompanied by the need to locate pre-beginnings that prepare and 'project the onset of talk'.

To use a metaphor, the intrinsic narrative resembles a social network analysis, cart wheeling forwards as well as backwards with different participants and points making their mark, and it can be transcribed in a similar manner, so that the linear temporal transcription, typical of much conversational analysis is transcended.

The intrinsic narratives indicate something of the form aspect of the viva, demonstrating how the different parts cohere or hang together. But, what of the content? This is where the extrinsic narrative aspect is relevant. The argument developed is that participants appeal to different narratives to legitimate their statements, and these narratives lie outside the viva. Thus, in educational viva it is to be expected that participants might seek legitimacy for their views by arguing that teacher practice supports their views. In other words, a narrative on professional competence is sought to legitimate a statement, perhaps, but not always through the citation of a well-known researcher on the topic. Narratives and the legitimacy they provide are an indication of the manner in which the individual, in this case one of the participants, draws upon a repertoire of public socio-cultural, professional and scientific narratives. Expressed in functional terminology, narratives provide a link between the individual and the collective (Lawler, 2002).

Lyotard (1986) also considered how extrinsic narratives legitimate knowledge. For example, liberation (rooted in experiences of 1789) or ideas in themselves (as seen in the idea/spirit of the German university) have historically been the two *grand* narratives used to legitimate scientific knowledge. But, Lyotard (1986: 26) argues that in post-modernity there is a certain *mourning* that 'knowledge is no longer principally narrative'. Instead, knowledge is legitimated according to its performativity and capacity to maintain systems. Such a view however, must not be taken to mean that all kinds of narratives to legitimate knowledge disappear. Lyotard argues himself for local narratives, which might be called small narratives, that legitimate knowledge pragmatically in the context of the event. Such small narratives do not have the universalistic ambitions of grand narratives. Examples of small narratives in Lyotard's work are the manner in which scientific knowledge does not have to be of a denotative character (know-that), it can also include local notions of 'know-how', 'knowing how to live', 'how to listen' (1986: 18).

Some of his ideas can be reworked to understand how a participant, in drawing upon a certain narrative for legitimacy seeks to assume a position of mastery, and convince others who may prefer a different narrative. Instead of Lyotard's term grand narrative, the term master narrative is used because it indicates the agonistic character of a master narrative, which might face resistance from other narratives. These are best known as small narratives, in the sense that they dispute the master status of the dominant narrative. It is important to underline, how a master narrative is conceived as universal, in its ambition to win over and eliminate other narratives. The term 'small narrative', is thus used in this dissertation for those narratives that attack this dominance, without necessarily desiring, in return, universal recognition<sup>43</sup>.

When a master narrative fails to achieve a position of dominance, it might be because participants have evoked what Lyotard calls a condition of the *differend*:

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<sup>43</sup> Stanley (2007: 14) uses the conceptual pair master narrative and counter narrative, where the latter is defined as narratives acting 'to deconstruct the master narratives, and they offer alternatives to the dominant discourse'.

As distinguished from a litigation, a *differend* (*différend*) would be a case of conflict, between (at least) two parties, that cannot be equitably resolved for lack of a rule of judgement applicable to both arguments (Lyotard, 1988: xi).

When such occurs, it is interesting to examine whether repair of the ongoing conversation takes place, and if so, how. The lack of a shared rule of judgement might be because the participants are not playing or following the same language game at that particular point in the viva. As a consequence, repair becomes necessary to return speakers to the same language game.

When a filmed viva is analysed with respect to extrinsic narratives, it must not be assumed a priori that each instance of an extrinsic narrative corresponds, ‘hand in glove’, with a cluster of questions and answers (or another language game) organised around a topic. Instead, it should be anticipated that one or more extrinsic narratives might be drawn upon in a single cluster.

The conception of the extrinsic narrative legitimating what takes place in the viva is also related to the manner in which the positions of the participants require legitimation and this comes from outside the viva, even if it is confirmed (or potentially disputed) in the actual viva. Put simply, the viva’s institutionalised framework becomes an extrinsic narrative believed by participants, allocating roles to participants, and from these roles, different obligations and privileges accrue. The roles and narrative of these roles provide concrete evidence of social structures in society, and the distribution of power and status (Schegloff, 1992). Typical roles in the viva are those of the candidate, examiner, and on occasions that of the supervisor who may, or may not be allowed to express views on the candidate, or grade setting. These roles can be mirrored in the statements and orientation of participants to each other (e.g. who has the right to ask questions and who answers). *Category-bound activities*, a term introduced by Sacks (1972:338), are generated by participants as their behaviour and speech treats the identified roles (including in my terminology narratives connected to these roles) as *relevant* and *determinant* of their activity. Moreover, as Sacks (1978: 259) noted, the teller can be part of the narrative, referring to themselves and their roles in the account presented. Likewise, in the viva, usually towards its beginning, the

candidate can be asked to account for their role in the production of the dissertation. At other times in the viva, the candidate can be asked to give an objective account of their findings, without making this account dependent upon their involvement. In other words, the roles occupied by the participants permit the voicing of particular narratives and power gains its material expression in, and through these narratives. Likewise, these roles can be challenged when small narratives are voiced in opposition.

### **Transcription**

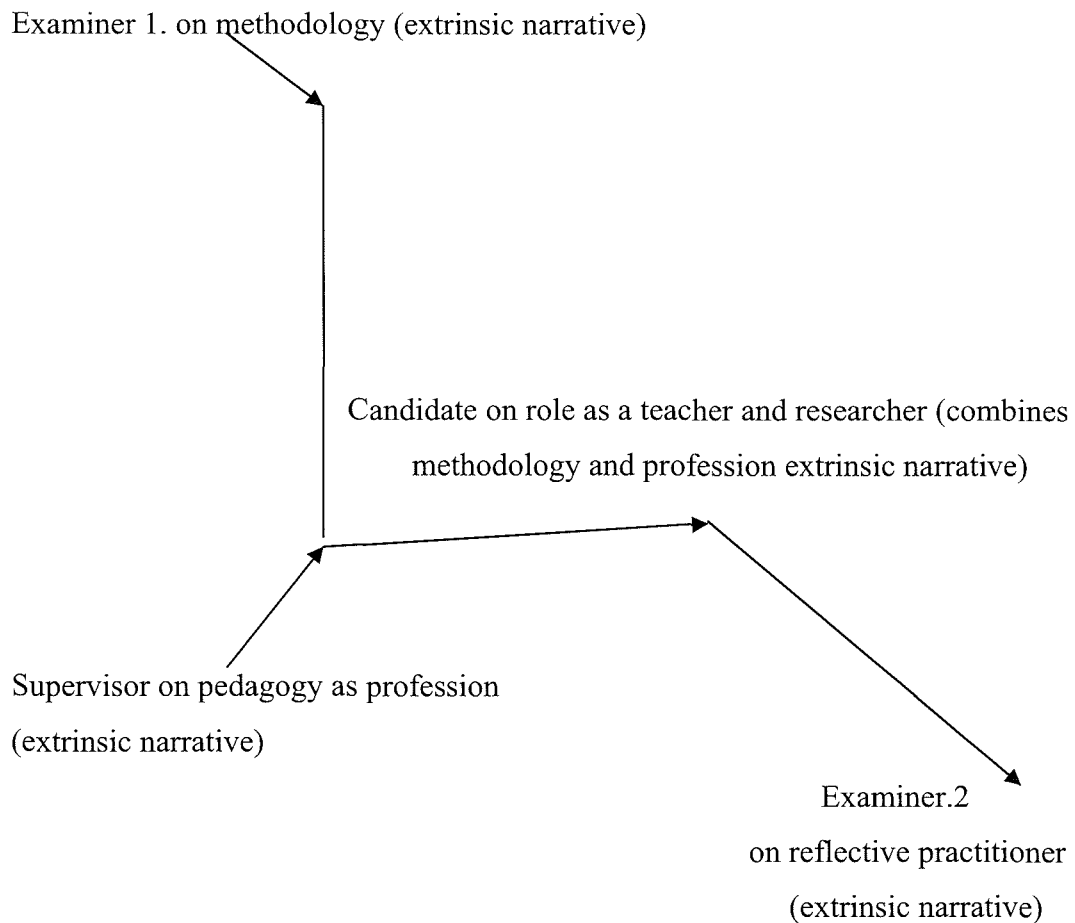
With a varied data archive containing filmed vivas, along with interviews, some of which were filmed, and others, in which the questions and answers were noted as they took place, different forms of transcription have been utilised to make the data accessible to analysis<sup>44</sup>. Firstly, this does not mean that the different forms cannot be marshalled to explore a single research question. Secondly, Goodwin's (1996a) point that forms of transcription are never neutral as they code, highlight and produce graphical representations of the phenomena under study, must also be kept in mind. Thus, there is a tendency, as ethnomethodologists have noted, that the coding practices followed by the researcher will generate a form of perception and conceptualisation that views both the data collected and the social practice of the viva as ordered and structured.

Each filmed narrative was viewed with the following in mind: narratives (intrinsic, extrinsic, roles) and conversation analysis (including language games and the co-ordination of talk with the corporal/tools). For the former, rolling cartwheels were produced, where short textual notes and arrows indicated the points in the viva when a certain statements was made, by whom (and their role status) and the character of their intrinsic (direction, points and accents) and extrinsic narrative significance. The cartwheel below illustrates the narrative notation of the filmed viva.

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<sup>44</sup> But, of course, 'the transcript may and does incorporate some analysis' in the process of deciding what is to be included in the system of notation (Psathas and Anderson, cited in Have, 1999: 91).

**Diagram: narrative cartwheels – a fictional example**



In this diagram, the narrative of the viva has two points of origin, and the candidate combines them. Thereafter, examiner no.2 moves the narrative forward by drawing attention to the debate by Schön on the reflective practitioner. The multi-point origin is also multi-accented with two different speakers and the forward direction is indicative of the intrinsic character of the narrative, just as the content is indicative of the extrinsic narrative drawn upon by participants. It might be argued that the methodology, and profession narratives, when combined create a master narrative, and the reflective practitioner narrative might not be a master narrative, but, a small narrative resisting the master narrative. On the contrary, it might be contended that the reflective practitioner is the master narrative, and the combined methodology and profession represent a small narrative. Following the moving cartwheel will make it possible to determine which of the narratives are master and which are small narratives.



When the filmed vivas were explored with the tools of conversation analysis, the goal was to produce a reader's transcript 'that will look to the eye how it sounds to the ear' (Schenkein, quoted in O'Connell and Kowal, 1981: 85). The advice of O'Connell and Kowal (1981: 101) was also followed, that a reasonable economy should dictate 'that transcription be limited to features to be subsequently analyzed' and that it should not have too much information. Accordingly, Have's (1999: 213) transcription convention has been used in a more relaxed manner (see Appendix IV). For example, paralinguistic features (e.g. laughter, breathlessness) and prosodic features (e.g. pitch, duration and loudness) have only been notated when relevant, in the sense of having consequences for behaviour or statements of participants, in the ongoing development of a particular viva. In particular, this study has been interested in highlighting turn taking, clusters of questions and answers (and other language games), the repair of the conversation, along with the beginning and termination of the viva. Co-ordination of talk with corporeal and tools was shown within double brackets.

The last form of transcription was connected with interviews that provided insights into the socio-cultural, socio-political and socio-economic background of participants and their common sense reasoning. Textual notes were made from the interviews. Some of the interviews were filmed.

As the readership for the dissertation is English, the quoted statements from the filmed viva and interviews were translated into English, with the original spoken Norwegian provided as a footnote. Two schools of thought exist on how literal the translation should be: those who argue that the translation should flow, so that the presence of a translation is disguised, as opposed to others who argue that the translation should be literal, in a morpheme-by-morpheme gloss, so that it appears strange, and the reader is clear that a word or clause is difficult to translate (Dobson, 2003)<sup>45</sup>. In this dissertation the preference has been more towards the former, rather than the literal standpoint. Footnotes indicate the original Norwegian and also when it was hard to find a good English equivalent for a certain Norwegian concept e.g. *dannelse* a word commonly used in academic and

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<sup>45</sup> Translating has much to do with Wittgenstein's (1994) point that each word or clause is embedded in a form of life and it is sometimes hard to find a word or clause in English, itself a form of life, that corresponds to the form of Norwegian life in which the word is embedded.

vernacular Norwegian, meaning the same as the German *bildung*, is poorly and more narrowly translated with the word *upbringing*. Similarly, it is difficult to find a good translation for *brennende forståelse*, and *lightning sharp understanding* is at best a meager attempt.

To summarise, the argument developed in this chapter has been that each instance of the viva has to be researched in three ways: by conversation analysis (including language games and the co-ordination of talk with the corporeal and material), by narratology and lastly, by exploring background socio-cultural/socio-political/socio-economic variables and common sense reasoning held by participants. The diagram of a triangle presented at the beginning of the chapter has presented these methodological concerns and the next chapter will explore their possible inter-relations. Amongst other things, the diagram will be re-configured with background socio-cultural/socio-political/socio-economic contextual factors and common sense reasoning surrounding language games, narratives and elements identified through conversation analysis.

## Chapter 5

### The Viva ‘Talked into being’

What one must say in order to be heard,  
what one must listen to in order to speak,  
and what role one must play (on the scene of  
diegetic reality <sup>46</sup>) to be the object of narrative.

*The Postmodern Condition*, Lyotard

This chapter <sup>47</sup> presents and analyses the data collected; conversation analysis coordinated with tools/bodily movements, narratology and language games are used for this purpose. In addition, this chapter explores an issue raised earlier in the dissertation (Chapters 1 and 4), the background socio-political, economic and cultural context of the viva (including common sense reasoning of participants). On this occasion, the focus is upon how, and to what degree the background context has exerted an influence on the viva as it is talked into being. As a preliminary, an extract from one of the filmed Master in Education vivas will be presented in some detail to provide the reader with an insight into the kind of viva studied in this dissertation and their transcription. In Chapter 4, it was noted that the data archive included not only the filming of Master in Education vivas, but also the filming of undergraduate vivas in an advanced education course and the observation of undergraduate vivas in a Travel and Tourism BA. Analysis and comparison of the undergraduate vivas will be reserved for Chapters 6 and 7 of

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<sup>46</sup> Diegetic, from the Greek meaning a recounted story

the dissertation, when the validity of the viva as a form of assessment is raised for discussion.

Each filmed viva constituted an instance of the viva as a social universe/social practice with a pre-viva meeting, viva and post-viva meeting, but in this chapter the intention is to present only extracts. To have presented long transcriptions of each filmed viva would not have demonstrated, in itself, an analytical understanding of the specificity of each viva (e.g. unique signature) and their commonalities (e.g. the extrinsic narratives on the meta-reflection of the viva as a discipline). With long transcriptions there is the ever-present danger that they are 'expected simply to speak for themselves' (Back, 2007: 17). As the goal is analytical generalisation, it is deemed sufficient to present the extracts, following the premise that, where possible, the extracts in support of a point are balanced by an extract to the contrary. For example, it was necessary to highlight participants who obviously felt the presence of the camera influenced them, and those who were not affected. Moreover, presenting the long transcriptions would have tried the patience of the reader with excessive detail, and taken attention away from analytical findings based upon these transcriptions. A preferred strategy might have been to present, as an appendix, a DVD copy of one of the vivas so that readers could visually see how it unfolded. However, as participants in the filmed viva spoke Norwegian and not English, this has not been applicable in this study.

It might be charged, that even with the points above in mind, too little data is provided. In an attempt to rebut this charge, Appendix III provides the complete transcription from one of the filmed viva (involving a nursing educator) referred to on a number of occasions throughout this chapter.

### **A filmed viva**

The Master in Education vivas explored in this dissertation, all took place at the same university college, and were based upon the candidate's prior submission of

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<sup>47</sup> Parts of this chapter have been published (Dobson, 2007a) in Norwegian in *Norsk Pedagogisk Tidsskrift* (Norwegian Journal of Education) and in English in *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education* (2008).

a 50,000 word dissertation <sup>48</sup>. The result of the viva, which could adjust the preliminary grade awarded in the pre-viva examiner meeting, constituted 50% of the overall grade for the master degree. The remainder of the degree was based upon 3 compulsory essays submitted in year one of the two-year degree program. There was a connection between the 3 essays and the dissertation: candidates in general were encouraged to include the content of the three essays in their dissertations, so that in principle the same content was assessed and graded twice, once in the essay and once in the dissertation. It is obviously questionable if the same piece of work should be graded twice, and also whether the later submission should be an exact or approximate copy of the earlier one. I shall not explore the connection between the essays and dissertation, either in the remainder of the chapter or elsewhere in the dissertation.

The day of the viva involved three distinct phases: the pre-viva examiner meeting to determine the provisional grade (from A-E, with F as a fail), the viva and the post-viva examiner meeting when the final grade was determined. The candidate waited in the corridor during the post-viva meeting. They were called in to receive notification, and an explanation for their final grade. The supervisor was present in all three phases and was allowed to actively contribute to deliberations and questions to the candidate. The role of the supervisor varies and in some master vivas elsewhere in Norway, the supervisor is not allowed to be present because it is believed that he/she might act in partisan fashion. In one of the vivas explored in this chapter, a supervisor wished to give the candidate a considerably better grade than the examiners. The danger of partisanship cannot therefore be ruled out.

The choice of extract from one of the filmed viva is not accidental: it provides an example of what is considered to be crucial in the viva, namely, grade setting and how this is talked into being. The title of the candidate's dissertation was as follows:

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<sup>48</sup> Nationally, the length of the master in education dissertation varies from 30000-50000 words.

With the Body. A Phenomenological Study of How Students on the BA Nursing Program Experience their own Body as a Source of Learning While on Placement <sup>49</sup>

He chose phenomenology because it provided a way of conceptualising how nursing students acquired knowledge, and experience of their own bodies, while learning and working on placement. As he put it in his dissertation:

To act in a concrete manner in nursing includes among other things moving, communicating and experiencing. In this connection our bodies and corporeal dispositions are significant resources...With our bodies we participate in each other's existence and a common world...In order to gain knowledge and understanding of the dissertation's topic I have chosen a phenomenological platform and a qualitative approach (Olsen <sup>50</sup>, 2004: 2-3, my translation).

The candidate had many years of experience as an anesthesia nurse, and more recently teaching nursing students his skills in a nearby nursing college. This provided the background for his interest in how the bodily awareness of students was an important dimension in their learning experiences, while on placement.

The chosen topic provided a platform for him to comment on the more general debate about the relation between theoretical knowledge and practical learning experiences. In this debate an important concept for him was 'knowledge-in-action' (*kunnskap i handling*); a term he had gleaned from an article entitled *Praksis, teori og kunnskap i handling* (Practice, Theory and Knowledge in Action) by Fuglestad (1996).

In fact it was this article, read by the candidate during the first year of the Master in Education Program, that focused his interest on 'knowledge-in-action' and its ability to bring about a merging of theory and practice. The candidate's particular understanding of this concept was based upon the aforementioned mediating role played by the nursing student's awareness of their own bodies. In the examiner

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<sup>49</sup> I kraft av kroppen. En fenomenologisk studie av hvordan studenter i bachelor utdanningen i sykepleie opplever egen kropp i læringssammenheng i praksis.

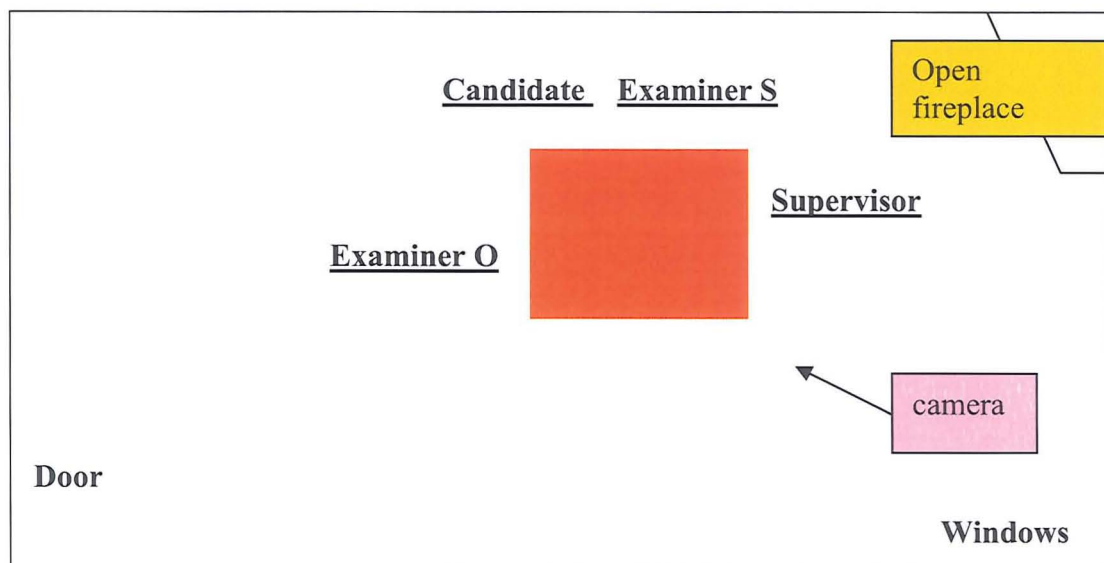
<sup>50</sup> His name has been changed to protect his identity.

meeting, one of the examiners was adamant that the candidate had not reflected sufficiently upon this concept.

### **The room for the viva**

The room for this master viva and for the others was called the *peisestua* (fireplace room). It was one of the oldest rooms in the college, dating to about 1900, when the college had originally been an agricultural school. The room was paneled in wood, and painted in a pale, soft blue. The room had a high ceiling, and was softly lit by hanging lights. All furnishings were of wood, except the large stone fireplace in one corner. The room felt peaceful. Other rooms, elsewhere in the college, were less relaxing with their bright colours, and modern plastic furniture.

**Diagram: Physical placement of the participants in the paneled room (painted blue)**



### **Example of a cluster from the viva described above: arriving at the provisional grade in the pre-viva examiner meeting**

The grading discussion found its extrinsic legitimacy in the institutionally defined goal of the viva; namely, to assess the student's achievement. The previous cluster was terminated when examiner S introduced the grading discussion in an abrupt manner. It might be speculated that the participants felt ready for the grading discussion; they had discussed methodology, the phenomenology theory section at

the beginning of the dissertation, and the paradigm discussion towards its end. In the course of the pre-viva meeting, they had moved from the beginning of the dissertation to its final pages.

The supervisor said that a letter grade (*bokstav karakter*) was required as a provisional grade. Examiner S added that the candidate wrote well. However, before he could finish he was interrupted by the supervisor and had to wait to add with a 'but', that the candidate didn't use enough educational theory. Examiner O returned to the supervisor's point, and reflected on the new letter grading system that had recently replaced the older numerical and Latin based one. The supervisor declined to propose a provisional grade, and made it clear that the examiner had this responsibility. Examiner S said it would have been a B if it had had more pedagogy content, while examiner O was of the opinion that the theory section was worth a B, but the presentation and discussion of the data was worth only a lower grade, because the candidate had argued incorrectly that the nursing program lacked an emphasis on acquiring knowledge through practice. The supervisor defended this point and said the candidate had perhaps a political project in the sense of wanting to up-grade practical knowledge.

Examiner S stated that the dissertation had too much philosophy and that the data could have been presented differently. Examiner S, the external examiner, asked if it was permitted for the candidate to go up a grade in the oral and received a reply in the affirmative. The supervisor revealed that he originally had the provisional grade at A, but retreated from this to admit that there was too little evidence of pedagogy reflection and that there were weaknesses in the presentation of the data. So he suggested a strong C. Examiner O latched onto this admission and suggested that the provisional grade should be C with the candidate being offered a chance to talk of weaknesses in the dissertation. The rest of the grading discussion covered how the candidate was to be told that the dissertation had weaknesses, but not precisely which ones; and as such, he was to highlight them in a critical fashion without assistance from the examiners.

The participants then began to divide the 'labour' of questions in the viva: the supervisor was to ask on phenomenology and examiner O on categories in the



dissertation. However, examiner S didn't choose a particular cluster, and instead, re-stated the view that the candidate should reflect upon his own weaknesses.

Finally, the supervisor asked examiner O for his grade:

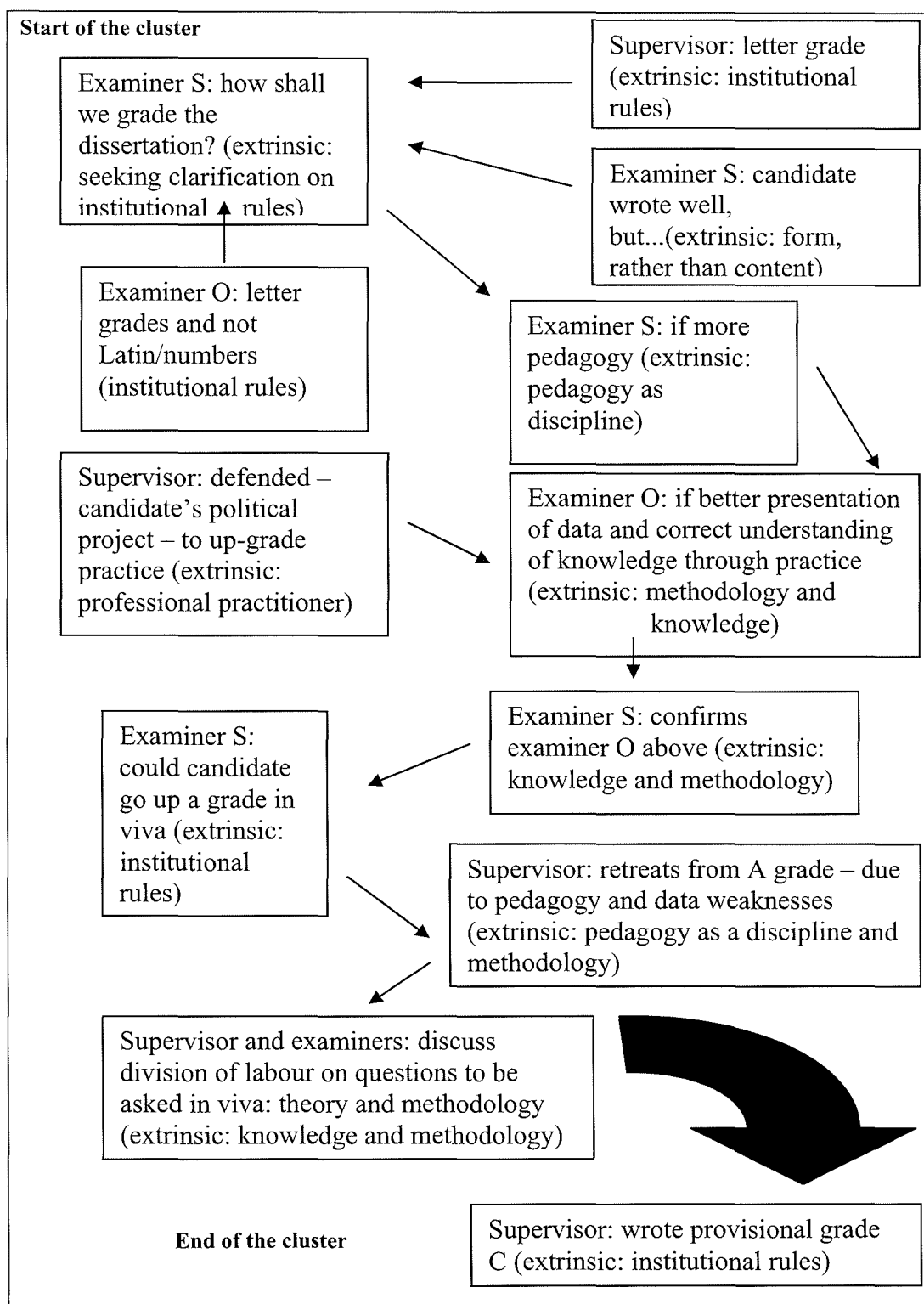
**Supervisor** But what is your choice as the provisional grade O? ((looks to O as he speaks)) Is it a C, is this really what we are looking for?  
**O** [Ye::::s, Ye::::s  
That is what we are talking about] ((O turns pages in the dissertation and does not look up))  
**Supervisor** With the possibility of going up to B=  
**Examiner S** =B if he is convincing ((stretches himself))  
((looks to examiner O))  
**Examiner O** yes=  
**Examiner S** =yes=  
**Supervisor** =C ((S writes it on a piece of paper in the middle of the table)) <sup>51</sup>

This grading discussion, visualised in the diagram below, illustrated the manner in which the supervisor's small narrative of opposition (grade A) was withdrawn, and a master narrative was constructed, where all agreed that C was the correct provisional grade. Furthermore, it is worth noting that the examiners were not required to submit a written examiner's report on the dissertation, nor were they required to submit a written report covering the viva and its outcome. All they had to send to the college administration was a grading sheet containing the provisional and final grades.

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<sup>51</sup> Hva foreslår du som foreløpig karakter? Er det C, det er det vi egentlig mener.  
Ja, ja, det er det vi mener.  
B om han er overbevisende.

### Diagram: The provisional grading cluster



The table below summarises the clusters and narratives present in not only the pre-viva meeting, but also in the viva and post-viva examiner meeting from the filmed viva presented above. Firstly, of particular interest is the manner in which individual extrinsic narrative components found in a single cluster might be

repeated in a different cluster. Secondly, some of the clusters were repeated in the three phases of the viva, indicating support for Jefferson's (1978: 221) concept of *embedded repetition* (see Chapter 4). As such, the intrinsic narrative of the viva through its three phases was not simply chronological with a beginning, middle and end, but multi-directional and multi-punctual. Thirdly, the repetition of extrinsic narrative components or clusters had a function: they held the pre-viva meeting, as well as the viva and post-viva meetings together, acting as a kind of invisible glue.

**Table: Clusters and narratives in different phases of the viva**

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Pre-viva examiner meeting</b></p> <p><b>Opening cluster in the pre-viva - role clarification:</b> Roles defined by institution, pedagogy as a discipline, knowledge in dissertation</p> <p><b>Tacit knowledge cluster:</b> Knowledge in the dissertation, professional practitioner, reflective and deep thinking student, pedagogy as a discipline</p> <p><b>Pedagogy as a discipline and methodological issues as clusters:</b> Pedagogy as a discipline, knowledge comes from the corporeal, methodology</p> <p><b>Paradigms as clusters:</b> Knowledge, professional practitioner, pedagogy as a discipline, methodology</p> <p><b>Grading as cluster:</b> Institutional rules, form rather than content, pedagogy as a discipline, knowledge, methodology, professional practitioner</p> <p><b>The camera and informing the candidate of the provisional grade as clusters:</b> Institutional rules, inclusion of all participants, knowledge and practice</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Viva</b></p> <p><b>Opening cluster in the viva: strength and weaknesses:</b> Rules defined by the institution, form rather than content, pedagogy as a discipline</p> <p><b>Phenomenology cluster:</b> Knowledge, knowledge comes from the corporeal</p> <p><b>Tacit knowledge cluster:</b> Knowledge, knowledge comes from the corporeal, professional practitioner</p> <p><b>Methodology cluster:</b> Knowledge, methodology</p> <p><b>Theory and practice cluster:</b> Professional practitioner, knowledge</p> <p><b>Pedagogy and knowledge cluster:</b> Pedagogy as a discipline, knowledge, methodology</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Post-viva examiner meeting</b></p> <p><b>Tacit knowledge cluster:</b> Knowledge, pedagogy as a discipline, knowledge comes from the corporeal.</p> <p><b>Grading cluster:</b> Institutional rules, pedagogy as a discipline, knowledge, knowledge comes from the corporeal.</p> <p><b>Calling in the candidate to inform of grade as cluster:</b> Institutional rules, methodology, pedagogy as a discipline.</p>

### **Analysis of how the vivas were “talked into being”**

Language games, narratives and conversation analysis/co-ordinated with tools/bodily movements provide the methodological and conceptual tools for understanding and analysing how the viva were talked into being as a social practice. In what follows, the analysis draws upon all of the filmed master vivas, including the pre-viva examiner meetings, and the post-examiner meetings.

### **Language games**

The instances of the viva were stabilised as social practices through language games (Wittgenstein, 1994), for example, through the question and answer clusters. Conversely, the arrival of unexpected language games, or participants exceeding their allocated moves in language games disrupted or unsettled the stability, causing on occasions a break-down in a language game, or the arrival of a different language game. For example, in one of the filmed pre-viva examiner meetings, one of the examiners continued to return to the question and answer language game, even though the other participants drew the pre-viva meeting to a close through the parting language game.

Unsurprisingly, the dominant language game was the interrogative, based upon questions and answers. I have not introduced a category distinction between types of probing question (detail oriented, elaborating or clarifying), or between closed or open questions, in the sense proposed by Torrance and Pryor (1998: 152-154), who identified convergent and divergent assessment questions. The question category approach was adopted by Trafford and Leshem (2002), who only looked at types of questions, and not answers<sup>52</sup>. Nor have I sought to identify other under-categories or distinctions between types of answers<sup>53</sup>. I have chosen to remain at a higher level of abstraction and talk simply of the interrogative language game, with the understanding that this language game subsumes different possible under-categories of questions and answers under its umbrella. This strategy is in accordance with Wittgenstein's (1994, §68) point highlighting the ‘family

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<sup>52</sup> Trafford and Leshem's question categories are re-produced in Chapter 2. There are many other possible question categories e.g. Yaphe and Street (2003) propose the following in their study of medical student vivas; stem, exploratory, confirming

<sup>53</sup> Having said this, I present in Chapter 7 an example of a lecturer asking questions in a particular manner in the undergraduate Travel and Tourism vivas.

resemblance' or overlapping that might exist between the different under-categories of questions and answers. The overlap in this case is a shared interest in searching for a response, by posing a question, and its desire for an answer<sup>54</sup>.

Other language games were also evident, such as the reciprocal greeting and reciprocal parting game, and the assigning of a grade, which was an evaluative language game where a judgment on the candidate was reached and communicated. This evaluative language game had all the trappings of a norm-reproducing and norm-giving social practice, as norms were on the one hand, reproduced according to what was seen to count as a grade between A and F and on the other hand, constituted by the participants. Obviously, even if the interrogative language game dominated in terms of the amount of time devoted to it in the viva, the evaluative language game possessed high stake significance and was the key language game with social consequences for the candidate's future.

It must additionally be noted that the Norwegian higher education system has recently moved from a numerical sets of grades from 1.0 to 6.0 (with *laudabilis* [praiseworthy] 2.5 or better considered as the threshold for students wishing to progress to higher, post-graduate degree programs and *immaturus* [immature] 4.1-6.0 indicating a fail) to a letter system A-F. The latter were introduced in autumn 2003. However, examiners in the evaluative language game have tended to reconvert the A-F into the earlier numerical grades, and then back again into the letter grade (e.g. with a B considered to be from 2.2 to 2.5). This reversion may be a transitional phenomenon, and disappear with time.

Examiners (since 2003) appear to believe that the new letter grades are imprecise, and don't indicate if a candidate is close to moving up or down a grade.<sup>55</sup> This

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<sup>54</sup> Family resemblances might have been used to defend an approach whereby the viva was not defined in a once and for all manner with certain fixed components. Accordingly, the viva's definition would have been deferred, arguing instead that the viva was as an activity that resembled and overlapped other similar activities, such as a conversation or a chat on a cellular phone or an interrogation in a police station. With respect to defining the viva I have not adopted this approach (see introduction and Chapter 1). I have sought to understand the viva genealogically and etymologically, in terms of a shifting definition connected with different socio-cultural, political and economic interests. Like Wittgenstein however, my focus has been on how activities have become materialised in practice.

<sup>55</sup> As a point of comparison it can be noted that research on Norwegian secondary school changes in grading systems has highlighted how examiners might still operate with a 'deep structure' of grade differentiation, long after the grading system has changed (Vagle, 2005: 93, 97).

has not been systematically explored in this dissertation, and the basis for my assertion that examiners question the precision of the new grading scales is based upon informal conversation with examiners and Dahl's (2006: 21) point that reducing the span of the grading scale 'simply reduces error that may arise from the assignment of close but not same actual scores' between examiners. I interpret her to mean that in the case of two examiners agreeing on C, for example, no indication is given as to how, and if the grade is close to the border with a D, in the middle of the C or on the border of a C to B. This detailed differentiation was possible with the decimal increments of the earlier numerical grades.

However, having made these points on imprecision, I return in Chapter 7 to describe how some examiners operated with terms such as a weak C, a clear C and a strong C to provide and indicate the transitions between grades. This can be interpreted as an attempt to re-create the precision possible with the older numerical grades and decimal divisions.

The language games common to the viva studied were:

- Greeting and parting language game
- Report language game, that had the character of denotative statements describing and proposing a truth, which may have been local or more universal in ambitions.
- Interrogative language game, with questions and answers probing denotative assertions.
- Grading, as an evaluative language game, with norm giving social consequences

It is worth noting that Lyotard (1985, 1986), inspired by Wittgenstein, talked of the first three kinds of language games. But, he did not connect these particular language games to the social practice of assessment and the viva. Thus, the evaluative, interrogative and report have been appropriated in this dissertation because they correspond to, and capture respectively the social practice of grading, questioning, describing and making statements about content in the dissertation. The greeting and parting language game is important, because it 'frames' the social practice, to use Goffman's (1974) turn of phrase; making it clear to actors when they are on stage and off stage and when they must manage

their identities in public. What these conceptions of language games and framing share, along with their relevance to understanding the viva, is a highlighting of the performative aspect of the social practice.

### **Ex 1.: The report language game**

The report language game is typical of the opening sequence in the pre-viva, when the supervisor gives an account of not only the dissertation's topic, but also the candidate's progress of working on the dissertation. It is also typical of the opening in the viva when the candidate is given the opportunity to introduce the dissertation. As an example of the former:

**Supervisor:** In the beginning we wrote a time schedule for the dissertation and he followed this. To begin with he was set on an empirical dissertation then more theoretical.

**Examiner YN:** So you received a response to your tutoring?

**Supervisor:** We have had a good dialogue= ((The other examiner inhaled and said 'yes' under his breath, mmmmm)) ((as the supervisor talks, his hands move in the action of offering a gift several times))

**Examiner J:** =Go:::od go:::od

**Supervisor:** He has a broad understanding.

**Examiner YN:** What about the amount of work? These kinds of dissertations can be demanding.

**Supervisor:** He is not work shy and worked a lot.<sup>56</sup>

Especially of note is the manner in which the interrogative language, based upon questions and answers, became a part of this language game.

It must be noted that the conceptual apparatus of language games differs from a Foucaultian (1972) perspective with its emphasis on discourses and institutional structures. The latter tends to presume already constructed discursive sites into

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<sup>56</sup> I begynnelsen skrev vi en plan for avhandlingen og han fulgt det  
Til å begynne med var han bestemt at det skulle bli en empirisk avhandling etterhvert mer teoretisk  
Så du fikk en respons fra din veiledning?  
Vi hadde en god dialog  
Bra  
Han har en bred forståelse  
Hva med mengde arbeid? Disse avhandlingene kan bli fort krevende  
Han er ikke arbeidssky og arbeidet mye.

which subjects are positioned. The apparatus of language games recognises the existence of pre-existing language games, each with their own precepts, but it is more open to new or transformative moves in language games. This reflects the open, rather than closed potential of the viva. As outlined in Chapter 1, this is the debate between those who regard the viva to be structurally determined, as opposed to supporters of the view that the viva is an event (Rømer, 2003). The insights of both structure and event make it possible to conceptualise in a dialectical manner how the viva is talked into being. The structural aspect will be returned to later in this chapter, when the socio-political, cultural and economic context of the viva are explored. However, it should be noted that I have argued (in Chapter 3) against adopting the discourse approach as proposed by Foucault because among other things, it less easily grasps the chess-like moves and counter-moves of participants.

**Ex2.: The interrogative language game: a cluster on the topic of tacit knowledge in the viva**

In this language game the focus is upon questions and answers. Examiner O opened a long cluster of questions probing one of the topics raised in the pre-viva examiner meeting, namely, tacit knowledge and why the candidate had said so little about it. The examiner drew attention to the fifth category identified by the candidate on p. 41 of the dissertation; experience and reflection which prepared the ground for the main topic of this cluster (tacit knowledge). The question the examiner asked in effect was the following: What was to count as valid informant experience, and how well had the candidate rationalised and made it into explicit knowledge? Phrased differently, the internal examiner was concerned with the transformation and translation of first order, largely tacit experience, into a second order level of constructs and so-called scientific knowledge (Schutz, 1962: 36). To each of the questions, the candidate made a reply. Of note is the way in which the roles were enacted, and not reversed: the examiner asked and the candidate replied.



**Examiner O** Towards the bottom of page 41 you have 5 categories.  
They come from your data?

**Candidate** Yes

**Examiner O** They come from your data. Not out of thin air. They go together ((R demonstrates: the fingers of his two hands interweaved in mid-air and the candidate nods)) But there is one thing I miss (1.0) a more explicit discussion of experience and reflection.

**Candidate** [ye:::::s, I agree] But then again, experience and reflection was an underlying theme throughout the dissertation ((holds his right hand up in the shape of a small cup moving away from him))

**Examiner O** [mmm I agree] But what about tacit knowledge? How could that have been explicit? How would you have included it?

**Candidate** I could have done it=I thought about it (2.0) But you know how it is, you make choices in the process with the physical form of presentation.<sup>57</sup>

### **Ex3.: The evaluative language game: grade setting in a post-viva examiner meeting**

Worthy of note in the following evaluative language game from a different viva<sup>58</sup>, is the following: the manner in which the participants sought an agreement and confirmation of their views; by making references to reasoned arguments in support of their judgments and by achieving eye contact with the other participants. Furthermore, when the grade had been fixed, one of the participants continued to provide reasons for the grade. The supervisor opened the grade setting cluster:

**Supervisor** What we are really saying is that it is a C=  
**Examiner S** =it is perhaps so ((the examiner reached for the sheet with grading criteria))<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Mot bunnens av side 41 har du fem kategorier. Kommer de fra dine data?

Ja

De kommer fra dine data. Ikke fra luften. De går sammen. Men det er en ting som jeg savner en mer eksplisitt diskusjon av erfaring og refleksjon.

Ja, jeg er enig. Men likevel, erfaring og refleksjon var en underliggende tema gjennom avhandlingen.

Jeg er enig. Men hva med taus kunnskap? Kunne det har vært eksplisitt? Hvordan kunne du har inkludert dette?

Jeg kunne har gjort det. Jeg tenkte på det. Men du vet hvordan det er, du tar valg i prosessen med den aktuelle fysiske presentasjon.

<sup>58</sup> i.e. not the viva introduced at the beginning of this chapter.

<sup>59</sup> Supervisor: Det vi egentlig sier er at det er en C/Examiner S: Det er antagelig det

Examiner S, considered that the candidate had written in an independent manner; one of the stated criteria for a grade B. This he read aloud to the others from a piece of paper with the descriptions of A-F, which had been distributed to all participants beforehand by the college administration (the grade descriptor is reproduced in the Appendix II). Examiner O, interrupted this line of thought to further emphasise the neglect of experience and reflection (one of the topics in the dissertation) and why this was a reason for the C, rather than B grade. The supervisor did not disagree, and brought the grading discussion to a close:

- Supervisor** N:::o, in sum we are in agreement it is a C  
 ((looking at external and then internal examiner)) I think that  
 is the point ((reaches for the paper to write the grade))
- Examiner O** [Ye:::s]
- Examiner S** = Yes I think so. If you feel in yourself ((examiner O  
 smiles and points his right index finger in to the air, examiner S  
 smiles back))
- Examiner O** We feel that it is correct. <sup>60</sup>

After the final grade had been fixed, and all had signed the grading sheet, examiner O voiced another reason for not giving a grade above C. It was to do with the candidate's failure to discuss the educational implications of his research. He therefore continued his interrupted line of thought and the two others agreed that this was the main weakness in the dissertation and its defence. The supervisor stood up and prepared to recall the candidate to the room. As he did so, examiner O reluctantly agreed that he would be the one to tell the candidate what was lacking, and what would have been required for a B.

### Conversation analysis

Even if language games are identified, more detail is required and the question posed is: how were the language games 'pulled off' in and through the talk of participants? From the tools of conversation analysis, it can be learnt that participants took turns to occupy the floor, repaired the flow of conversation, and initiated or terminated the conversation/clusters. These actions shaped the moves within each instance of a language game, and provided the boundaries between the different language games. Another way of putting this, is to say that without

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<sup>60</sup> Nei, sum summarium er vi enig at det er en C. Jeg tror det er poeng  
 Ja, jeg tror det. Hvis du kjenner etter

the tools identified in conversation analysis, the participants would not have been able to use the language games. Conversely, without the language games the sentences uttered by participants would have lacked a certain meaning and coherence, making participants more vulnerable to misunderstanding each other.

Examples of turn taking are to be found in the extracts presented above. They demonstrate how important the roles of examiner and examined are when it comes to securing a sense of order, and predictability in turn taking. The initiation or termination of conversation/clusters was revealed in the transition between language games, such as the interrogative and grading, and also between clusters within the same game.

Of special interest was the role of moments of silence and their function in securing these transitions:

- Silence on occasions marked the transition from one cluster to another. It therefore functioned simultaneously as a termination of the cluster and as an invitation for the initiation of a new cluster.
- Silence was also found within a cluster, where it might indicate either a pause in a single speaker's speech, indicating uncertainty or the need for time to think, or, the silence marking the end of a person's turn and the invitation for another to take the floor and pursue the topic of the cluster.
- Silence indicated in one instance a break-down in the flow of conversation and the need for repair
- Silence as a strategy in a cat and mouse game

The following series of extracts from a pre-viva examiner meeting contain examples of a potential break-down (the 5 second silence) that is averted, a transition from one cluster to another (silence of 7 seconds marking transition from grading to camera cluster) and silence within a cluster (2 seconds) as the speaker pauses to think of an answer:

Immediately after the grade had been written, examiner S looked to the camera which was running, and introduced a new cluster of concerns after a period of silence:

(7 seconds, examiner O stretches back in his chair as the supervisor continues to look at the dissertation and examiner S takes a sip from his mineral water)

**Examiner S** Will anybody stand behind the machine ((he points to the camera)) or are they just going to let it run?=  
**Supervisor** =Let it run (2.0) after a while we will forget it is on=  
**Examiner S** =Where are we going to place him then?<sup>61</sup>

Nobody was behind the camera, and this short exchange illustrated a reflexive awareness of the camera in the room. The supervisor refused to admit that it might influence the participants. The examiners did not object to his view, so the supervisor and the examiner began to discuss where the candidate should be placed so that the camera lens would see all the participants.

As they discussed, examiner O mumbled to examiner S:

[I can ask him about experience and reflection?]<sup>62</sup>

He received a nod in the affirmative from examiner S. When the positioning of the candidate had been decided, the participants returned again to the allocation of the questions – repeating the prior allocation, with examiner S not making a decision. The narrative looped backwards to the previous cluster, and might have remained there if the supervisor had not then asked if they should tell the candidate his provisional grade at the beginning of the viva?

**Supervisor** Shall we (1.0) I mean that there are different practices about telling him of the provisional grade (2.0) shall we tell him when he comes in or shall we say nothing? (4.0) They have the right to know (3.0)  
**Examiner S** We can say we have a few critical comments and it is up to him ((S looks at O)) or (1.0) will it stress him too much? (5.0)

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<sup>61</sup> Vil noen stå bak maskin eller skal det bare gå?  
La den gå etter hvert vil vi glemmer at den står på.  
Hvor skal vi plassere kandidat?

<sup>62</sup> Jeg kan spørre ham om erfaring og refleksjon?

**Supervisor** I don't think it will break him he is quite strong=

**Examiner O** =what if he expects=

**Examiner S** =((laughs lightly)) I don't think so ( ) tough for him. <sup>63</sup>

The supervisor added that the 'right to know' was stated by the examination office on a piece of paper attached to the outer side of the examination room door.

Examiner O shared uncertainties about the way this was normally done in other vivas. After some hesitation by the three participants, it was decided that the candidate would be told his provisional grade and that it was only a provisional grade, which could be improved. As soon as this was decided, they took a break for 5 minutes before the viva.

Are master and small narratives to be found in the hesitations and silences about the camera, allocating questions and communicating the provisional grade? If there are any small narratives, they seem to disappear as agreement is reached on each of the issues.

### **Example: Silence and the cat and mouse game**

In an early part in one of the filmed pre-viva examiner meetings, silence marked the end of a person's turn within a cluster, and yet the impression was that two of the participants used this silence as a part of a *cat and mouse game*. Whilst waiting for the third participant to reveal his hand, it appeared as if they did not want to completely reveal their positions<sup>64</sup>. As the pre-viva examiner meeting progressed, there were fewer silences, indicating that the participants were more confident about each others' positions.

The tools of conversation analysis therefore assist in understanding the materialisation of language games. In the above, silence has been highlighted, but

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<sup>63</sup> Skal vi jeg mener at det er forskjellig praksis når det gjelder å fortelle han om sin foreløpig karakter. Skal vi fortelle han når han kommer inn eller skal vi si ingen ting? De har krav å få vite. Vi kan si vi har en del kritiske kommentar og det er opp til han eller vil det stresse ham for mye? I tror ikke at det vil knekke ham han er ganske sterk  
Hva hvis han forventer  
Jeg tror ikke det. Tøff.

securing the transition between and within language games is also possible through verbal means. For example, a direct call to take up grading and the evaluative language game or, a more smooth transition as the discussion of the content of the dissertation has been exhausted in interrogative fashion and all that remains is the grade fixing sequence.

### **The co-ordination of talk with tools and corporeal movements**

In Chapter 4, it was argued that talk might be co-ordinated with tools and corporeal movements. Was this the case in the filmed viva studied? In order to answer this question, an extract from the final minutes of one of the filmed vivas will be examined:

**Examiner J:** We could have asked about many more things but we don't need to. ((looks down at the dissertation, turns the pages)) I would like to ask about one thing to finish. You ask (2.0) I think if there should be a certain transition in pedagogy from didactics to dialectic ((as he said didactics and dialectics he moved his hands up and down like two weights on a pair of scales, rolling each hand at the same time)) ((the candidate by contrast looked at his dissertation and stroked his head to times in a slow motion))

**Candidate Å:** ((leant forward and turned head to examiner Y)) Could I ask where you are looking?=((leans back))

**Examiner J:** =On page 105. The openness you say pedagogy ((supervisor and candidate turn to page 105, but second examiner does not)) must have is not linear. I think of didactics as a touch of the linear attitude ((hands moved up and down like two weights on a scales, but no rolling hands this time)) while the dialectical ((hands at a distance and moved horizontally from side to side)) is a mutual transformation so that one can act and it can not be stopped because it in a sense never stops.

**Candidate Å:** Do you mean that they should be united?

**Examiner J:** I am not saying this. I mean neither one nor the other.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> This form of silence might have been explored as wait time. Wait time is usually understood as the time in seconds waited by a teacher in a classroom context after asking pupils/students a question.

<sup>65</sup> Vi kunne snakket om mye mer men det trenger vi ikke å gjøre. Jeg kunne tenke meg å spore til slutt. Så spør du synes jeg om pedagogikk må ha en viss overgang fra didaktikk til dialektikk. Kan jeg få lov å spore hvor du er?

På side 105. Den åpenhet som du sier man må ha i pedagogikk er ikke linær. Jeg forbinder det didaktisk litt med lineær holdning mens dialektikk er vekselvirkning inn i gjensidig for så å si kan handle og kan man aldri stoppe opp fordi det på en måte aldri opphør.

Mener du de skal forenes

Jeg sier ikke det. Jeg sier ikke verken den ene eller det andre.

In the filmed viva the main tool was copies of the respective dissertations, which the candidate and examiners opened and quoted during the viva, as this example demonstrates. The dissertation was not a source of authority in itself. In order to gain authority the essential ingredient was the candidate defending – orally – the arguments and content of the dissertation. This recalls one of the arguments of Chapter 3, that the viva was a functional whole, incorporating both the oral and the textual. Phrased differently, the dissertation required something from outside of itself to gain its authority, such that it never was, or could be complete in itself.

With respect to corporeal movements, it was the hands that were most often used to support a statement and the body was either bent forwards when a person began to talk or inclined backwards when the turn was concluded. The example above demonstrates this, but all the filmed vivas were capable of providing similar examples. Such use of the hands and body are to be expected when the participants do not stand or move about during the viva. Secondly, it is possible to note that the movement of hands was typical of the person speaking. Those listening made few hand movements, and if they did, they were more of the character of touching a part of their own body, or playing with a pen in an absent minded manner. They were not undertaken to reinforce or mirror the speaker's statements. In other words, they were not directly related to what was being said.

In Chapter 3, it was noted that the viva might have an existential dimension including emotional and ethical dimensions. Was this the case? When the topic was the co-ordination of talk with the corporeal it was also possible to gain an insight into the emotional. Take the following exchange in the grading cluster from a pre-viva examiner meeting.

**Examiner J:** This dissertation is a solid B;;; open to discussion if an A.

**Examiner YN:** (5.0) ((inhales slowly) If it is to be an A then the candidate must distinguish himself. What is required is filing work on the phrases for an extra semester. To gain that little extra. Solid B (3.0) lacks connection between essays ((in the dissertation)) to get an A. Wh::at have you given the dissertation? ((turns to the supervisor))

**Supervisor:** Quite agree (1.0) but if we have a good discussion ((in the viva))

move the grade up to an A.<sup>66</sup>

Of interest are the sentences by examiner YN. The silences, the inhaling, the hesitations; all these things suggested that he was existentially unsure about how good the dissertation actually was. He turned to the supervisor for assistance.

The ethical was evident on a number of occasions. For example, in the following extract the candidate admitted that she could have made a different set of choices and said more about tacit knowledge. From an ethical point of view, she admitted rather than tried to conceal their omission:

**O** Could you say something about it? ((tacit knowledge))

**Cand.** It is to do with the body=tacit knowledge is a much discussed concept (2.0) It is tacit in a verbal sense but is expressed in the situation there and then and it is natural to reflect over this experience and thereby find a place for it (3.0) mmm s:::o it is highly topical with respect to the body (2.0) So if there is something I could absolutely have considered then it is tacit knowledge.<sup>67</sup>

Firstly, the analysis of the findings supported by conversation analysis and the co-ordination of talk with the corporeal lend support to Trafford and Leshem's (2002) research on doctoral vivas. They were interested in the synergy generated by the social dynamics of the participants. But, they did not undertake conversation analysis and only located their research within the broad framework of ethnomethodology. Synergy remains a diffuse theoretical concept, especially when it lacks the empirical support that could have been provided by conversation analysis.

Secondly, their research tended to view the viva as a system seeking to maintain a quasi-stationary equilibrium and yet, on occasions, it is precisely a lack of

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<sup>66</sup> Denne avhandling er en solid B åpen til diskusjon om det er en A.

Hvis det er en A må kandidaten skiller seg ut. Det som trengs er å file på replikkene å få det lille ekstra. Solid B mangler forbindelse mellom essayene til å få A Hva har du det på?

Helt enig men hvis det blir en god diskusjon tar det opp til A.

<sup>67</sup> OK kunne du si noe om det?

Det har noe å gjøre med kroppen=taus kunnskap er et mye diskutert begrep. Det er taus i en muntlig måte men det er uttrykt i situasjonen der og da og det er naturlig å reflektere over denne erfaringen og dermed finner en plass for det. Så det er høyst aktuell med hensyn til kroppen. Også om det er noe jeg absolutt kunne ha tatt med er det taus kunnskap.



equilibrium that is the driving force, which leaves its mark on the viva as a social practice. This was clearly evident in one of the vivas studied, when the roles of examiner and candidate were momentarily disrupted and to some extent reversed. The examiner was critical of the candidate's use of the term 'case study', but the candidate refused to accept the criticism. He retorted angrily in defence of his definition, and in the process, disrupted the asymmetrical relations of power between the examiner and candidate:

**Examiner Ø:** There isn't any data covering a long slice of time=that's a precondition if it is to be a case study ((hand moving from side to side))

**Candidate Å:** I must have dislike=misunderstood ((impossible to translate from Norwegian, where there is a pun/Freudian slip on dislike and misunderstood, both beginning with *mis* in Norwegian)) it because I was under the impression that it could be for a period.

**Examiner Ø:** Indeed ye::::s a period is open to discussion. It is in principle not a period we are talking of here ((he makes a sign with his hand vertically downwards in the air from above his head to table top)) ((candidate leans back and opens both hands in a short movement, palm upwards)).

**Candidate Å:** I had data from December and January ((puts both hands down, palm down in a strong demonstrative movement)) Isn't that long enough?

**Examiner Ø:** Ye::::s it is a case study ((examiner leans back blows his nose. Candidate took a sip from his glass of water)).<sup>68</sup>

The candidate's narrative achieved dominance, and the examiner for the remainder of the viva was less critical of the candidate.

Rather than norms, at least for the short period when the candidate disputed with the examiner, norm-less anomi reigned. Norms were in dispute (Durkheim, 1984). Asymmetry was both revealed and disputed in this example, and it was the tools of conversation analysis that assisted in this revelation. Consequently, even though Trafford and Leshem might have argued that balance had been restored, it

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<sup>68</sup> Det finnes ikke noe data over et lengre utsnitt == det er en av forutsetninger å kalle det en case studie.

Da har jeg misforstått=misforstått det for trodde det kunne bli for en periode  
Jo ja en periode det er åpen til diskusjon. Det er i prinsipp ikke noe periode å snakke om  
Jeg hadde data fra desember og januar Er ikke det langt nok?  
Ja::::a da er det en casestudie

was a balance dependent upon the examiner giving-up, or perhaps, merely repressing, in a directly Freudian sense, what they really believed was the case. Put differently, it was a balance based upon imbalance, an equilibrium resting upon disequilibrium.

Significantly, *anomi* was a threat that had to be held at bay if the viva was to proceed and secure the functional integration of the candidate and the functional integration of the viva (see Chapter 3). It being the former functional integration of the candidate, in the sense of securing the candidate's qualification for a profession, or for further research at a doctoral level, and the latter functional integration of the viva, in the sense of ensuring that the viva constitutes a part in the whole of this particular exam with the submitted dissertation. The grading of the dissertation with the viva was also part of a larger whole, as noted earlier: the grade counted 50% for the overall degree, the remainder was based upon 3 obligatory essays submitted and graded in the first year of the master program.

### **Narratives**

In the clusters of the filmed viva different extrinsic narratives could be found. Take for example, the reaching of the provisional grade cluster referred to at the beginning of the chapter. It had the following extrinsic narratives: institutional rules, form rather than content, pedagogy as a discipline, knowledge, methodology and the professional practitioner.

Each instance of the viva viewed as a whole, including the pre-viva and post-viva examiner meeting, tended towards a single dominant master narrative, which over-shadowed the other extrinsic narratives found in each viva. It provided the *unique signature* of the viva and reflected:

- a) the specific topic of the dissertation as presented by the student and,
- b) background interests and competencies of the examiners/supervisor(s)

How unique was the signature in each viva? On the one hand, it was not unique since it originated from the limited number of extrinsic narratives found in all the vivas examined:

1. Meta-reflection on education as a discipline/profession (e.g. role of theory and practice, paradigms, practitioner, roots in the Enlightenment).
2. Clarifying roles and procedures (e.g. what should the supervisor say in the pre-viva examiner meeting discussion towards a preliminary grade; should the candidate be told the provisional grade, where should the camera be positioned).
3. Concern with methodological issues, including issues of form/content and presentation (e.g. qualitative use of data in an empirical treatise or use of concepts in a theoretical treatise).

On the other hand, the specific topic of the dissertation meant that the master narrative drew upon one of the above extrinsic narratives, giving it a particular content and form.

Explained in philosophical terms, the unique signature was derived from the 'particular' influencing the 'general' in a specific manner. In sociological terms, the individual cases studied found their position within the boundaries of shared norms, and at the same time marked the presence of a new narrative move.

To illustrate these points, consider the following viva: The examiners and supervisor had backgrounds in social philosophy, distance learning, media pedagogy and communication. Combined with the topic of the dissertation, digital self-formation (*bildung*) and what it means for education as a field of knowledge and practice, the dominant master narrative drew on the extrinsic narrative of education as a discipline trying to break from its Enlightenment roots. Therefore, the viva's general character rehearsed a meta-reflection upon education as a discipline; while its unique signature was the candidate's attempt to justify the dissertation as a post-modern perspective on digital pedagogy, and how it differed from education's Enlightenment heritage.

In a second viva, the dissertation was based on nursing students, and their experience of their own bodies while on placement. The examiners were interested in how theory was combined with practice, and the debate among academics on the reflective practitioner. They had both been educated and worked as teachers. The dissertation's topic and the background of the examiners and supervisor resulted in a viva where the dominant master narrative focused on education as a practical activity. The viva's general character, rehearsed as above, an extrinsic narrative based upon meta-reflection on education as a discipline; but this time it was a discipline concerned with, and drawing upon its roots as the practical activity of teachers and students. The unique signature of the viva revealed not so much the role of the teacher in practice, but that of the student on placement and how they might learn.

A third example, was the viva exploring a dissertation on the socialisation of footballers into the culture of their local, semi-professional football club. The examiners had a background in the sociology of education and sport education. This influenced their concern with the football club as an organisation paralleling other kinds of organisation, such as the school. But, it was not the dominant master narrative in the viva. Instead, this involved the extrinsic narrative grouped around methodological issues and the unique signature explored if the empirical research had involved the exploration of a case. The examiners probed this in the viva, and the candidate defended his position that case study research had been undertaken.

In a fourth viva, the dissertation explored counseling, and how workers in two companies undertook this task, even if they did not use that term to describe the activity. Despite the appeal to a narrative of activity grounded in the work of Vygotsky and Dewey and the attempt to propose counseling activity as the dominant master narrative, the dominant master narrative was not a meta-reflection on education as the practical activity, of among other things, counseling. This dominance was thwarted by the examiners concern with the candidate's defence of his observational methodology (unique signature of the viva), such that the dominant master narrative had focused upon methodological issues.

It is worth dwelling on the concept of the master narrative as defined in this dissertation: it encompasses narratives aspiring to be universal and excludes the presence of small resistant narratives. In each of the filmed vivas one master narrative was revealed as dominant; and this dominant narrative was drawn from the limited number of extrinsic narratives found in the vivas (see list above: meta-reflection, clarifying roles, methodological issues). At the same time there were other aspiring master narratives in each viva, also drawn from this same list of extrinsic narratives. These aspiring master narratives failed to dominate the whole of the viva. Their sphere of dominance was restricted more locally to the level of the cluster as they fought off corresponding small narratives of resistance.

Take the following example from a methodology cluster in one of the filmed vivas. In the opinion of the examiners, the candidate had struggled to gain knowledge of the nursing student's corporeal awareness. The supervisor was on the defensive, and admitted that the candidate's interview guide might be at fault, because the questions were too open. The two examiners had the following methodological concerns: firstly, the desire for a more quantitative presentation of data and secondly, how to gain access to the feelings of informants. The supervisor conceded that these methodological concerns, constituted a master narrative capable of over-powering his small narrative of a more qualitative presentation of the data. He decided to end the cluster by introducing a new cluster of questions: had the candidate introduced a new paradigm?

### **Background socio-political, economic and cultural context of the viva**

In Chapter 1, the socio-political, economic and cultural contexts of the viva were considered in genealogical terms. The focus was upon how they exerted a varying influence upon the conduct and form of viva in different historical periods. These factors were once again raised for discussion in Chapter 4. However, on this occasion the focus was slightly different. Instead of a genealogical approach, it was firstly the manner in which these contextual factors and the common sense reasoning of the participants might have exerted a structuring influence upon the filmed examples of the viva. In other words, the historical reach was reduced and narrowed to the preparations/events before the day of the examination, the viva and also to events or consequences after the viva. Secondly, there was an interest

in the manner in which the viva was talked into being, and it was how the socio-political, economic and cultural were made relevant and materialised that held the focus. Thus, it was not the case that a background factor, such as the socio-political, *a priori* would be expected to exert an influence in every instance. Therefore, in somewhat pragmatic terms, when it showed relevance, then it was considered relevant.

The filmed viva took place in a particular national context, one characterised by socio-political transformation and anxiety about the economic cost of external assessment. The trend towards transformation was evident in 1991, when the Norwegian Ministry of Education began to encourage the use of different forms of internal and external assessment, in order to improve the quality of higher education (Stensaker, 2006: 95). The government thus appointed a commission on the reform of quality in higher education (St. melding 27, 2000-01, §5.3.5). It continued along these lines, arguing that the use of external examiners in all exams must be questioned in terms of resources, as degree programs were becoming increasingly modular and required more frequent assessment, at a greater expense. Connected with these concerns was the view that final assessment should be downplayed because it fuelled cramming rather than learning and understanding (St. melding. op. cit).

The law passed in 2005 (*Lov om universiteter og høyskoler* <sup>69</sup>) stated that there was to be an ‘external evaluation of assessment practices’ and only in the case of higher degrees, was the external examiner to be an absolute necessity (§3-9 [1] and [2]). This was in accordance with international trends towards external quality monitoring (Stensaker, 2003). Despite this law, uncertainty still existed. Commentators questioned, this time in socio-cultural terms, whether the external examiners would remain impartial in their role:

The belief that when practiced it can work as a guarantee against assessment cultures is strongly exaggerated. It can happen, but the

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<sup>69</sup> University and Regional College Act.

norm is that the external examiner quickly adjusts to the local culture<sup>70</sup> (Hertzberg, 2005: 25).

Were these national anxieties and concerns reflected in the filmed vivas, and did they exert a structuring influence? In all pre-viva examiner meetings, there were narrative clusters where the participants clarified their roles. For example:

**External examiner J:** I don't know the level you expect in your college but I have extensive experience of examining vivas over many years. The field of this dissertation is not exactly mine.<sup>71</sup>

Statements such as these, confirmed the view expressed above that the external examiner was not adverse to making adjustments to suit the local assessment culture. Additionally, the filmed vivas revealed a concern with the role of the supervisor in the viva, in particular to do with proposing a grade:

**Supervisor:** I see my role as not the chairperson. I can comment on the candidate's progress. And I won't have a vote on the grade.<sup>72</sup>

The same examiner voiced the following when interviewed:

I am of the opinion that the supervisor ought to keep a little in the background. This is because as the supervisor one often wants the very, very best grade for the student.<sup>73</sup>

As regards the concern with resources used on examining, it was not so much the cost of the external examiner that worried and exerted a structural influence upon participants, but the fear that the host institution would lose state income if candidates were failed. In one pre-viva examiner meeting, the internal examiner said in a joking fashion that the failing of a single candidate would entail a loss of 36,000 crowns (approx. 3,000 GBP) in income. The external examiner nodded

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<sup>70</sup> Troen på at ordningen virker som en garanti mot lokale vurderingskulturer er sterkt overdrevet. Det kan nok skje, men det vanlige er at den eksterne sensoren raskt tilpasser seg den lokale kulturen.

<sup>71</sup> Jeg vet ikke nivå som forventes i deres skole men jeg har mye erfaring med muntlig eksamen over flere år. Avhandlingens felt er ikke akkurat mine.

<sup>72</sup> Jeg ser min rolle ikke som ordstyrer. Jeg kan kommentere på kandidatens utvikling. Og jeg vil ikke ha noe å si om karakter.

<sup>73</sup> Jeg er av den oppfattelse, at veileder bør holde seg lit i bakgrunnen. Dette, fordi man som veileder selvfølgelig ofte vil studentens aller, aller beste

rather than smiled, indicating the seriousness of the point being made and that it could be a problem, if fear of failing the candidate influenced the final grade.

In other words, the filmed vivas reflected the socio-cultural concern with the external examiner being socialised into the assessment culture of the institution. The socio-economic question of resources was not so much to do with the cost of the external examiner, but if a candidate should be failed <sup>74</sup>. Of note, is the small extent to which the socio-economic background of participants was raised or seen to be relevant in the filmed viva. The socio-political uncertainty brought about by nationally initiated policy changes in the viva, for example with respect to feared changes in the presence or absence of an external examiner, was not raised in the filmed vivas. This is not to suggest that such uncertainties were not raised *per se*, but that they were not raised in the context of the vivas as they were actually talked into being and did not therefore exert an obvious structuring influence.

On the other hand, outside of the viva, in interviews of experienced examiners the following kinds of answers were given to a question about the socio-political future of the viva, compared to other forms of assessment:

Fear that it will disappear (3.0) the demand for effectiveness ((with)) multiple-choice on the way in. This is not an exam. Of course the viva is unpleasant but it is the form of assessment that is best suited to the social sciences. <sup>75</sup>

If everything becomes formative it can disappear. Final exam has some advantages (2.0) the student can tell what they know. In the viva in media subjects the ability to communicate is important and the viva is therefore important. <sup>76</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Concern with this point is found in the Norwegian Ministry of Knowledge report (St. Meld. 7, 2007-8: p16), where it is noted that 37% of lecturers fear 'the funding system in the long-run will lead to a higher threshold for failing students.' Data collected on practice, does not however, support this belief.

<sup>75</sup> Frykter at det forsvinne (3.0) effektivisering, flervalg eksamen kommer. Det er ikke eksamen. Selvfølgelig er det ubehagelig med muntlig men det er den form for eksamen som passer best for samfunnsvitenskapene.

<sup>76</sup> Hvis alt er formativ, kan det forsvinne. Slutt eksamen har noen fordeler (2.0) studenten kan fortelle hva de vet. I muntlig for mediafag kan evne å kommunisere bli viktig og dermed er muntlig viktig.



I fear that cost will play a decisive role (2.0) to gain a total picture of the student and what they are capable of requires a viva but it is costly.<sup>77</sup>

Statements such as these suggest a shared, almost taken for granted background awareness about the threats facing the viva.

### **Common sense reasoning**

The taken for granted, common sense reasoning of examiners and candidates, also forms part of the contextual background, and might conceivably have structured the filmed vivas. As argued in Chapter 4, taken for granted reasoning is to do with detecting, demonstrating and persuading in a rational, reasoned manner. It is the manner in which participants reason and indications of this were obtained not merely in the viva, but also in the interviews prior to the viva. In what follows, the connections between the interviews and the performances in the viva will be explored. The example chosen is taken from one of the filmed vivas and the interviews connected to it:

My view is that the exam should aspire to the ideal speech situation where power relations are toned down. The goal is to make the student talk in an easy, open and explorative critical manner. To bring this about the external examiner and internal examiner have similar roles, as instigators of an explorative conversation where the control aspect is toned down and the explorative and questioning is adjusted up.<sup>78</sup> (interview of internal examiner prior to the day of the examination)

The inspiration for this comment is clearly Habermas, who influenced a whole generation of Norwegian academics, who were themselves students in the 1970s when the work of Habermas was avidly discussed and translated from German into Norwegian. The ideal speech situation should be domination free, where 'authority of the better argument could assert itself against that of social hierarchy' and power invested in roles (Habermas, 1989: 36). Habermas, and also

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<sup>77</sup> Jeg er redd at økonomi vil spille en rolle (2.0) å få til en helhetlig bilde av studenten og hva de kan er det nødvendig med en muntlig men det koster.

<sup>78</sup> Mitt syn er at eksamen skal tilstrebe en ideell talesituasjon hvor maktrelasjonene tones ned. Målet er å få studenten til å snakke lett, åpent og undersøkende kritisk. For å få til det skal sensor og eksaminator ha like roller, som pådrivere for en undersøkende samtale der kontroll-aspektet tones ned og den undersøkende og spørrende justeres opp.

this examiner were drawing upon the Kantian belief in the enlightened and rational individual. But, this heritage has longer roots, dating back to the Greeks, and their belief in dialectics, meaning not merely to argue or converse, but to argue for a conclusion or establish by argument (see Chapter 1).

In opposition to the domination free conversation, it is possible to conceive of vivas, where rationality is used to control and discipline a candidate, and their work (an example of this will be presented later, where the supervisor is 'disciplined'). Accordingly, domination free and control, appear as the outer points under which rationality might reveal itself. The former being more open and explorative than the latter. But, as this examiner suggested, these are ideals, and the question raised is the following: in the particular pre-viva examiner meeting and viva in which this examiner participated, was the ideal speech situation aspired to and achieved, or nearly achieved? Put differently, did the desire for the ideal speech situation structure the viva? Did this contribute in turn to its unique signature and the narratives upon which it drew, in this case, as a meta-reflection on education as a discipline with roots in Enlightenment?

Towards the beginning of the pre-viva meeting, after all those present had voiced the view that the candidate's dissertation was well-written, the following exchange took place:

**Examiner J:** The dissertation might be regarded as a rough draft for work on a doctorate. I would like to set in motion an exchange of thoughts with the candidate=

**Examiner Y:** =That is something we can all agree upon.<sup>79</sup>

This desire to explore the candidate's thoughts in an open, rather than controlling fashion coloured other statements in the pre-viva examiner meeting:

**Examiner J:** Normally the external examiner starts the viva (2.0) but I am open to alternatives. Letting the candidate start so he can function naturally is more important than what we say at the start.

**Examiner Y:** It is all too easy to behave as disciplinary ideologues.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Avhandling kan se ut som et utkast til et doktorgrads arbeid. Jeg kunne tenke meg å sette i gang en tanke utveksling med kandidaten  
Det er en felles oppfatning

The direct, rather than partially hidden reference to Habermas was lacking in the pre-viva examiner meeting, but in the viva the opposite was the case:

**Examiner J:** This is a solid dissertation. You don't need to be nervous. No control questions to check if you have understood things (2.0) more interested in directing questions to your dissertation that you can use later. Not necessarily difficult questions to bring you to a halt more for the sake of discussion.

**Examiner Y:** Yes, you have heard of a grilling (1.0) We have agreed to try and keep to a domination free conversation.<sup>81</sup>

This viva was clearly influenced by examiners who shared the desire to structure the viva as a domination free conversation. This coloured the viva as a whole, contributing to its signature. Thus, the master narrative drawn upon by participants to legitimate their views was a meta-reflection on the Enlightenment roots of education as a discipline, and at the same time the participants actually sought to achieve this in the manner in which they talked the viva into being. Phrased differently, form contributed to content and content to form.

As a consequence the candidate experienced the viva as a relaxing, rather than stressful event. In the post-event interview he said the following:

Quite early in the viva I was given the floor and was able to express my thoughts in an open manner.<sup>82</sup>

In this viva there was no evidence of common sense reasoning seeking to control and discipline the candidate and his dissertation. In another viva, the one already referred to at the beginning of this chapter, common sense reasoning was used with this in mind. On this occasion it was the supervisor who was disciplined. The internal and external examiner agreed that the dissertation in question should

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<sup>80</sup> Vanligvis er det eksterne som begynne muntligen men jeg er åpen til andre løsninger. La kandidaten starte slik at han kan fungere naturlig er mer viktig enn hva vi sier til å begynne med. Det er en felles oppfatning

<sup>81</sup> Det en solid avhandling. Du trenger ikke å være nervøs. Ikke kontrol spørsmål til å sjekke om du har forstått mer opptatt om å diskutere spørsmål til oppgave om du gå videre. Ikke nødvendigvis vanskelig spørsmål for å sette deg fast mer til å drøfte. Ja, du har hørt om en grill forestilling. Vi har blitt enig at vi skal prove å holde til en tvangsfrie samtalen

<sup>82</sup> Ganske tidlig kom jeg på banen og kunne fortelle åpent hva jeg mente.

receive a provisional grade of C because it had too much philosophy and the data didn't support its conclusions. Even though the supervisor had stated at the outset that he would not come with a grade proposal, he was asked at this point if he agreed on a C:

**Supervisor:** I have it at a better grade=

**Examiner O:** =What's that?

**Supervisor:** A (3.0) because he has a fine application of Merleau-Ponty's theory. Definitely A for the first part of the dissertation (3.0) but little educational discussion. It is at the very least a strong C grade.<sup>83</sup>

One of the examiners immediately latched onto this and proceeded to argue that the candidate should be given the chance to improve on this provisional grade in the viva, but C should be the provisional grade. In this example it is possible to see how the supervisor was forced – through reason – to abandon hopes of an A grade for the student.

It might be charged that supervisors will always tend to take the side of their candidate, but in the face of the reasoned opposition, what can they do, other than give up their defence? It might even be argued that the supervisor's retreat was still in this particular case, an instance of a domination free conversation; precisely because reason was still in evidence as he gave reasons for his abandonment of the A grade. However, in the course of the pre-viva meeting it had become increasingly apparent to the supervisor that the examiners were skeptical to a philosophical kind of dissertation. Secondly, they had not sought his view on a provisional grade until they had made their own decision. In sum, the supervisor had felt pressured and indicated after the viva that the examiners lack of interest in educational philosophy had coloured their views against the positive aspects of the dissertation. There were therefore indications that the reasons given for weaknesses in the candidate's dissertation, were actually manoeuvres used by the examiners to control and discipline the candidate (and the supervisor).

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<sup>83</sup> Jeg har et bedre karakter

Hva er det?

A fordi han har en fin anvendelse av Merleau-Pontys teori. Uten tvil A i den første del av avhandling men lite pedagogisk diskusjon. Det er med det minste en sterk C karakter.

The point is that common sense reasoning can be used to control and discipline participants and their statements, as much as it can be used to achieve the opposite, a domination free conversation.

### **Answer to the question ‘how is the viva talked into being?’**

In Chapter 5 the goal has been an analytical generalisation from selected filmed cases in order to understand how the viva is ‘talked into being’ as a social practice. One such analytical generalisation is that the viva is a social practice talked into being through its use of language games, narratives and the tools of conversation analysis. The viva is a staged (Goffman, 1969), normative activity with stable roles and rituals, such as greeting, questions, reports and so on. However, this stability can be threatened, as when the candidate in one of the filmed vivas resisted the assertions of one of the examiners. Nevertheless, such instances of resistance are rare and the predictability of the viva as a social practice outweighs its unpredictability. Put differently, the resistance is repressed, and kept at bay<sup>84</sup>. Another analytical generalisation is that the structuring role of socio-economic, socio-cultural and socio-political factors, along with the influence of common sense reasoning as a domination free conversation or the opposite, were not relevant or immediately evident in all of the filmed vivas.

The methodological ambition in Chapter 4 sought to develop a multi-faceted approach to researching the manner in which the viva was talked into being as a social practice. However, such a multi-faceted approach risks the charge that it is too eclectic and fails to demonstrate whether there are any connections between each of the components: language games, narratology, conversation analysis and the co-ordination of talk with the body and tools, along with background contextual factors, such as common sense reasoning, socio-political, socio-cultural and socio-economic.

How might these parts be connected, if at all? Sequentially, as a hierarchy, as a network or perhaps in some other manner? It was thought at the end of Chapter 4 that these different parts might exert an influence on other parts. Chapter 5, showed the example of a socio-economic concern with failing a candidate; it was raised and provided a content in the evaluative game in one of the vivas. There were other examples, such as the common sense reasoning used in one of the filmed vivas to create a domination free conversation. This exerted an influence on the interrogative language game, so that the questions asked by examiners had

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<sup>84</sup> Little and Horn (2007: 79) might suggest that these are instances of ‘normalizing’ problems of practice’. My preference is to call these instances in which the resistance is kept at bay.

more the character of inciting a discussion, rather than controlling and disciplining the candidate in strictly demarcated conversational turns. The candidate in this particular viva, was able to ask questions about the external examiner's views. In other words, the background context was seen to influence the language games and the roles and turns in the conversations, providing content for the narratives voiced. The last mentioned, in the sense that the examiners' desire to create a domination free conversation was discussed in the pre-viva examiner meeting, and was constituted and made reference to, as an extrinsic narrative on the clarification of roles intended in the viva to follow.

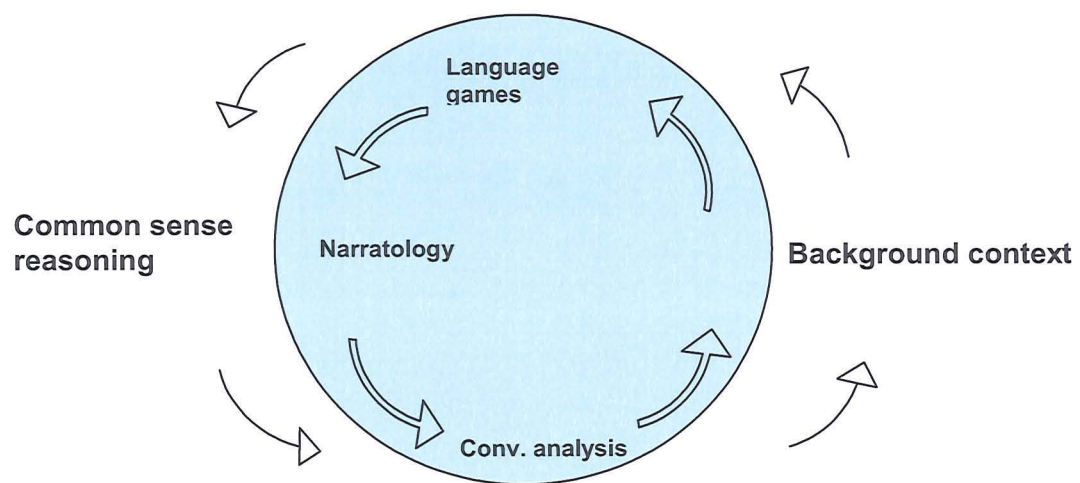
The lines of influence, and hence connection, identified between the background context/common sense reasoning and language games, conversation analysis and narratology, might be construed to mean that the former background context and common sense reasoning created the latter in a causal sense. However, such materialist argumentation must be avoided and resisted for its reductionism and also because it neglects the autonomy and specificity of language games, conversation analysis and narratology. Stated differently, the detailed discussion of language games, conversation analysis and narratology in Chapter 5 revealed that firstly, they each had their own dynamics and processes that could not easily be reduced to a simple mirroring of the background contextual factors. Secondly, they might in fact reverse the line of influence, such that they exerted an influence upon these background factors and common sense reasoning. For example, when the extrinsic narrative seeking to clarify roles and procedures was voiced, this exerted an influence upon the background socio-cultural factor, providing limits to the roles of the participants and how they were to be enacted.

What of the relationship between language games, tools of conversation analysis and narratology? In Chapter 4, it was suggested that language games might be realised through the tools of conversation analysis and narratology. Such an assertion, suggests a hierarchy with language games on the top, and conversation analysis and narratology functioning as 'tools', to support and realise precisely language games. But, the presentation and analysis of data in Chapter 5 suggested that each of these parts had their own dynamics and processes and no such hierarchy existed. Instead, the relationship between these three parts had more the character of mutual dependency, such that each of the parts were expressed in and

through the other parts. Take for the example the manner in which extrinsic narratives were revealed and evident in not only the language games, but also in the extracts demonstrating conversation analysis.

The diagram below summarises the lines of influence and dependency between the parts constituting the multi-punctual approach of Chapters 4 and 5.

**Diagram: lines of influence and dependency**



Chapter 5 has sought to demonstrate that the viva is a social practice in the sense that 'the social universe (read social practice) is formed by a plurality of games' (Lyotard, 1985: 58). Accordingly, the viva was talked into being as it established and gave shape to a number of language games. But, it was more than a plurality of games, it was a plurality of narratives, tools of conversation analysis, background factors and types of common sense reasoning.



## **Part III: What Would a Validity Argument Look Like for the Viva?**

## Chapter 6

### A Validity Argument for the Social Practice of the Viva

In interrogation  
There is an ocean of silence  
Between question and answer  
My accomplices concealed behind a veil  
I make ready the sails in a boat without name.

*Siktet (The Accused)*<sup>85</sup>, Stephen Dobson

This chapter makes the argument that the validity of the viva as opposed to its reliability, should be given primary attention. My contention is that this entails, constructing a validity argument for the viva, where the process of validation is a key component, along with a particular focus upon the judgments made by examiners and the constructs they use. A model for the validity argument as a social practice of the viva is proposed for this purpose. While the part of this chapter devoted to the theory of validation may apply equally to several forms of assessment, such as the test, the viva, performance assessment and the portfolio, the specific details of the validity arguments for each particular form of assessment will vary, and this is the case with respect to the viva. A portfolio's validity might offer prominence to assessment for learning; but, this will occupy a

lesser role in a viva held at the end of a course of study, when making judgments and grade setting demand more attention.<sup>86</sup>

### **The theory of assessment validity**

It is still possible to discuss validity, with terms such as content, concurrent, criterion and predictive; where content to take an example, considers the extent to which the assessment evidence measures what it is intended to measure (see entry on validity in Glossary). But, such a discussion runs the risk of considering validity as a fixed property of the test, and this debate has moved on to consider validity as a process of validation. Thus, the influential American Educational Research Association *Standards* states the following:

Validation is the joint responsibility of the test developer and the test user. The test developer is responsible for furnishing relevant evidence and a rationale in support of the intended test use (1999: 11).

The emphasis is therefore upon process and argument, which leads to assertions of validity for the assessment, in this case the viva. The shift in focus can be traced back to Cronbach and Meehl's (1955) paper on validation, where they introduced an interest in the 'principle for making inferences' and the role of constructs in guiding the developer and the user of the assessment. The assumption is that constructs are required because the reasoning and competencies possessed by students are latent and not directly observable. As Torrance (2000: 183) has put it, assessment through its focus on constructs seeks 'to access an underlying reality; to identify ... what a candidate can "really" do'.<sup>87</sup> The construct is therefore a construction on the part of the examiners to approach the reasoning and competencies of the candidate. As confirmed by Pellegrino *et al.* (2001: 117-118) with reference to psychometric testing:

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<sup>85</sup> Published in Norwegian in *Materialisten*, 1/2, 1991, p160.

<sup>86</sup> Of course, a presentation portfolio can function for summative purposes. Here I am thinking of the portfolio in which feedback is regular, and the student is able to add to or revise something enclosed in the portfolio.

<sup>87</sup> According to Pellegrino *et al.* (2001: 113), this is an idea that dates back to Spearman in 1904.

The construct is thought of as a continuous unobservable (latent) characteristic of the learner, representing relatively more or less of the competency that is common to the set of items and their responses.

Such a definition understands constructs in psychological/cognitive terms<sup>88</sup>.

However, construct in an assessment technical sense is contested and it is probable that multiple constructs are necessary to measure a student's performance and level of achievement. Thus, in the viva, this will include not only constructs measuring emotional states, communicative ability and certain kinds of rational thought (inductive reasoning, problem solving, arriving at inferences, and a meta-reflection on these forms of thought or on the discipline) (Levine and McGuire, 1970). It also includes less psychological constructs referring to domains, such as subject knowledge of the field, and topics presented in the dissertation/submitted work. Such domain specific knowledge can be thought of as 'know-that' knowledge, as opposed to the 'know-how' knowledge, or ability view of psychological/cognitive constructs.<sup>89</sup> Accordingly, I read Messick (1989, 1994) to mean that he is concerned with both psychological and more domain specific constructs.

Messick in his seminal work from 1989, elaborated on this concern with validation and constructs, understanding it as a 'shift from prediction to explanation as the fundamental validity focus' (1989:18). Messick was concerned with the 'appropriateness, meaningfulness and usefulness' of the assessment and he quoted Cronbach on this point: 'the argument must link concepts, evidence, social and personal consequences, and values' (1989:19). These 4 points made it possible to talk of validity in terms of the evidential and consequential, and in terms of not concepts, but constructs, that covered the use and interpretation of the test (Messick, 1988: 42).

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<sup>88</sup> Cronbach's definition in 1971 was similarly cognitive: 'A Construct is an intellectual device by means of which one construes events. It is a means of organizing experience into categories' (p464).

<sup>89</sup> Stated simply, constructs are not simply epistemic (knowledge domains), but have additional components, such as ability/competence and communication. A parallel argument has been made by Rowbottom (2007).

Popham, has disagreed with the extension of validity concerns, and argued that the examiner should not be concerned with the period after the exam:

The attempt to make the social consequences of test use an aspect of validity introduces unnecessary confusion into what is meant by measurement validity (1997: 13).

A weaker version of this is found in Lissitz and Samuels's (2007, 2007a) argument that factors external to a form of assessment (utility and impact) should be retained, but kept strictly separate from factors internal to the test (content validity, latent cognitive processes and reliability).

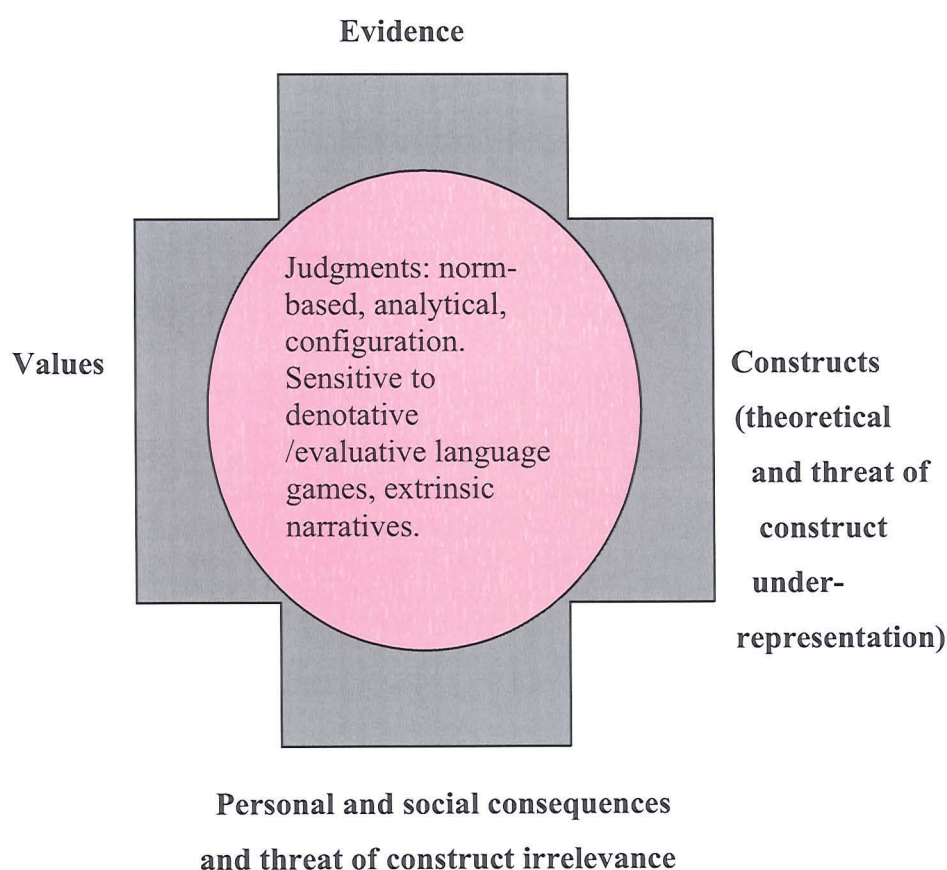
Messick's main point was that evidence from the assessment, its constructs, social and personal consequences and values, constitute the validity argument for the form of assessment. Still, they have to be combined, and this requires what he called a 'unitary judgment' bringing together different elements. Quite simply, validity is not something that a test has in itself, it is dependent on a judgment made by the examiners in each instance of its use. This judgment directs attention to the process of validation leading to the assertion of validity for each instance of the form of assessment. In a much cited sentence:

Validity is *an integrated evaluative judgment* of the degree to which empirical evidence and theoretical rationales support the adequacy and appropriateness of inferences and actions based upon test scores and other modes of assessment (Messick, 1989:13. My italics).

The viva attempts to score or grade the dissertation or submitted piece of work, but in order to do this, other modes of assessment provide assistance to the simple reading and grading of the submitted work, for example, as the performance of the candidate in the viva. As noted in Chapter 3, there is a functional connection and relation of dependency between the dissertation (which could in principle be given a grade by examiners without holding a viva) and the viva.

Central to an understanding of integrated evaluative judgments, social consequences and validation is the role of social relations between participants and what I have termed earlier (Chapter 3), the viva as a social practice. For this reason, the remainder of this chapter is devoted to the development of a model (see diagram below) that delineates the terms of a validity argument for the social practice of the viva. Elements in this model are presented in turn: the theoretical rationale for constructs, validity (as opposed to generalisability), values, and the personal and social consequences of the viva. These elements rotate around and interact with what is arguably the most important part of this model, namely the role played by examiner judgments. Examiner judgments in the viva are developed in an inter-subjective fashion, and therefore provide a good measure and illustration of social practices fundamental to the viva.

**Diagram: the validity argument for the viva as a social practice**



### **Theoretical rationales as constructs**

For readers looking to understand the concept of validity and validation, Messick's focus upon theoretical rationales might appear somewhat strange. Surely, validity has little to do with explicit theories? Reading a standard textbook, *Testing: Friend or Foe?* (Black, 1998: 42-50), the level of theoretical discussion is kept to a minimum. But, Messick, following Campbell, noted that many developments in assessments/tests in psychology and education had been historically 'orientated not toward clear theoretical constructs embedded in elaborated theoretical networks, but toward loose assemblies of concepts and implications or even toward more intuitive "folk constructs"' (p46). To become theories, they needed in Messick's opinion, a clearer sense of causal understanding and nomological, law-like consistency. Researchers today might baulk at such an open declaration of positivist beliefs.<sup>90</sup>

In one sense, theoretical rationales involve simply a theoretical concern with the kinds of constructs, whether psychological/cognitive or domain specific, used by the examiners and developers of the assessment/test. In another sense, Messick is widening the term theoretical rationale to include a meta-theorisation of the different and multiple kinds of theoretical constructs determining the kind of empirical evidence considered relevant to arrive at an assertion of validity.

### **Generalisability and construct validity**

Messick down-toned the traditional primacy given to generalisability and reliability. He noted the tendency to regard a test as more valid, the more generalisable, and hence, reliable it was. The generalisable referred to population generalisability, ecological generalisability, temporal, task and referent

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<sup>90</sup> Messick provided further insight into what he meant by 'theoretical rationales' when he drew upon Churchman's taxonomy of (meta-)theoretical research strategies (p33): Leibnizian (formal, logical systems, theory derived from axioms), Lockean (empirical network, developed inductively from observations), Kantian (same data set, but alternative conceptual systems used to analyse it), Hegelian (counter data sets and dialectical perspectives), Singerian (ethical ideas and implications). Messick asserted that most validity assertions have tended to use a Kantian perspective, without considering alternative (meta-)theoretical rationales (Singerian, Hegelian...etc). A researcher looking into the validity of a form of assessment should therefore make sure that they have reflected upon their theoretical approach in terms of the Churchman's taxonomy and the different alternative approaches it delineates. They should play the different theoretical strategies against each other. Today, Churchman's taxonomy must be enlarged to

generalisability (p57). But generalisability is not necessarily a good indicator of validity when constructs upon which it is based can fluctuate. Accordingly, it is not evidence *per se* which decides the appropriate degree of generalisability, but the nature of the construct and its theoretical appropriateness.

He illustrated this with referent generalisability, which is concerned with the extent to which evidence supports a construct's range of reference. Sometimes the range of variables and evidence for each can be too remote from the pivotal processes underlying the construct, with a risk of over-generalising or over-simplifying the interpretation of the construct. As Messick noted (p57):

[...] construct interpretations depend not only on available evidence, but on potential evidence, so that the choice of construct label is influenced by theory as well as by evidence and by ideologies of the nature of society and humankind that add value implications that go beyond evidential validity *per se*.

In other words, theoretical consideration of the construct will exert an influence on generalisability and validity, and considering just the evidence is not enough.<sup>91</sup>

The thread in Messick's argument is clear: construct validity represents the centre-pin of his understanding of validity. He gives it a broad definition (p17):

Construct validity is based on an integration of any evidence that bears on the interpretation or meaning of the test scores.

Defining construct validity in such wide terms was intentional on the part of Messick. This is because 'almost any kind of information about a test can contribute to an understanding of its construct validity'. The evidence provided by content (content validity), criterion (criterion validity) or social consequences (consequence validity) can all be subsumed under the concept of construct

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include a perspective on the viva as a form of control (Foucault) and as an instance of different language games (Lyotard).

<sup>91</sup> Messick (1980:1019) made a similar point in an earlier paper.



validity. It becomes the “master key” in his conception of validity, and validation practices.<sup>92</sup>

He developed his view of construct validity to suggest that it can measure threats to validity when there is evidence of construct under-representation or construct irrelevance (p34). The former, refers to a test that is too narrow and fails to include dimensions or facets of the construct. In a later essay, he provides the example of a performance test that looks at only the component skills and not complex skills, such as the meta-cognitive ability to organise and regulate the component skills for planning, monitoring and evaluating the performance (Messick, 1994: 20). Construct irrelevance refers to the test that contains ‘excess reliable variance that is irrelevant to the interpreted construct’ (1989: 34). As an example, he provided the examiner looking at English compositional skills who is influenced by the handwriting of candidates (Messick, 1994: 16).

What is problematic with Messick’s view, in my opinion, is the manner in which construct validity becomes the ‘catch-all’, and final arbitrator of even social consequences – since it is envisaged that they will contribute to the understanding of the construct and its validity.

## Values

Messick, in the spirit of Weber (1949), was concerned with how the empirical evidence (the viva’s dissertation and candidate performance) used by examiners might not be used in a value neutral manner<sup>93</sup>. Put differently, the examiner has a set of values, and the risk is that they will impose themselves in the unitary

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<sup>92</sup> Messick also made reference to Cook and Campbell’s (1979) view that internal validity – on the consistent use of the test instrument, such that the test itself causes the outcomes, and not other factors (e.g. pre-testing and increasing informants test skills) – is the most important factor in validity. Against this there is the view of Cronbach (1971), that the causal variables interact with populations and site characteristics, and can modify the meaning of the outcome. This makes external validity the key. But Cronbach added that the class of sites to which one generalizes are described and determined by the construct. This is tantamount to reducing the issue of generalisability to the theoretical definition and delimitation of the construct. Messick seems to have had most sympathy for this view, and argued that construct theories ‘typically entail some causal claims’ and this can be read as a similar desire to reduce internal and external validity to an issue of construct validity (p58).

<sup>93</sup> Messick actually went further and insisted that it was not merely a risk or danger. The ideal of a value-free social science was ‘passé’: ‘The issue is no longer *whether* to take values into account, but *how*’ (1989: 58).

validity judgment as the candidate is assessed. Thus, the examiners in one of the Master in Education vivas, both with experience of teaching in schools, valued the teacher as a reflective practitioner and this coloured their view of the candidate's discussion of the teacher. Messick contended that the tacit values and ideologies of the examiner and developer of the assessment should be revealed and this occurs when their world-view and theoretical perspective is confronted by a different one. Thus, it is a mistake to believe, in a positivist sense, that a form of assessment is value neutral. Examples of values are: positivistic research values where objectivity is a goal, or the opposite, where the value of personal or political engagement is valued and considered an asset.<sup>94</sup>

Messick provided little additional guidance about how values, or the possible complexities of ideologies, might be disclosed. Cherryholmes (1988)<sup>95</sup> has provided just such a far-reaching understanding of the value dimension in assessment constructs. Constructs are what mediate us with the world and are governed by:

[...] explicit as well as tacit rules and are policed by those in a position to give and withhold indulgences. Rules of discourses vary over time, place, profession and even within a profession...different discourses produce different 'truths' (1988: 429).

Constructs will therefore be shaped by beliefs, commitments, explicit ideologies, tacit world-views, linguistic and cultural systems, politics and economics and institutionalised roles. Moss *et al.* (2006) and Moss (2007), drawing upon hermeneutics make a similar point, and ask the users and developers of assessments to explore the soundness of 'interpretations, decisions, or actions.'

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<sup>94</sup> A small point to note, it is therefore incorrect to presume, as does Williams (1994: 12), that Messick 'suggests that values are only important for the consequential basis of validity argument, and that the evidential basis of validity argument is somehow free of value and ethical considerations'. For Messick, values impinged on all stages of the assessment process, from the development of the assessment to its application and social consequences.

<sup>95</sup> Inspired by Foucault.

## **Social consequences**

Messick elaborated upon the intended and unintended social consequences of assessment interpretation and use, and how these social consequences necessarily have personal consequences for the actual students. As an example of unintended side effects, he talked of the possible occurrence of sex or ethnic differences in score distributions and how they might lead to an adverse impact if the test was used in selection processes. To clarify what he meant he added that if construct-irrelevant variance was the cause of the adverse impact when the test was used then this was an issue of test invalidity. If on the other hand the sex or ethnic differences 'reflect valid properties of the construct tapped by the test, they contribute to score meaning and thus are an issue of test validity' (p85). What he is suggesting has important implications: adverse social consequences, associated with valid test interpretation and use, may implicate the attributes assessed, 'but they are not in themselves indicative of invalidity' (p89). Invalidity is therefore traced back to inadequacies resting with the construct at the outset.

This understanding of social consequences might be important in the case of the viva. Thus, if women perform more poorly in the viva than men, this is not necessarily indicative of the viva's invalidity. Unless it can be proved that male examiners are deliberately influenced by the dress and appearance of female candidates (or the reverse: women examiners influenced by appearance of male candidates), and they make this into a reason for giving women a poorer viva grade. They, are then guilty of construct-irrelevance.

Nonetheless, is a test invalid only on the basis of it having adverse consequences traceable to construct-irrelevant variance? For Messick this was the case because he traced the validity claim to the working of the construct. Cronbach argued for a broader view, 'tests that impinge on the rights and life chances of individuals are inherently disputable' (Cronbach in Moss, 1992: 236).<sup>96</sup> As I indicate in the next chapter, I shall not adopt Cronbach's wider view.

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<sup>96</sup> Moss reads Messick to mean that intended and unintended consequences of a test can also be judged by 'pitting various aspects of the proposed assessment system against plausible alternatives...including the generalized alternative of not assessing at all' (Moss, 1992: 238).

### **Operationalising Messick towards a validity argument for the viva**

Messick's contribution to assessment theory has been to give prominence to the question of validity when judging a form of assessment. As Stobart strongly put it, 'validity is the primary concern of any assessment' (Stobart, 2006a: 1). This breaks with the prominence given to reliability and generalisability. If internal reliability refers to the consistent use of the test, then in the context of the vivas studied in this dissertation, the form of the viva is given by the regulations in each institution and is fairly consistent. And while new, inexperienced examiners might be considered a threat to internal validity as they have limited experience, this is countered by the more experienced examiners who ensure that new examiners follow their lead. Likewise, when external reliability refers, among other things to the interference between two groups taking a test at different times, then in vivas where the submitted work varies in each case candidates talking to each other about experiences will have little role, other than, indicating broad topics for questions e.g. on methodology.

Central to Messick's approach has been the concept of construct validity and the manner in which validity is not a fixed property of an assessment. It is something that can be decided in a case-by-case manner for each instance of the assessment. For this reason, validity is not considered a property, but rests upon the process of validation.

Stobart (2006: 5) has noted that Messick's 'definition of validity is so all encompassing that it is difficult to know where to get 'a hand-hold' and operationalise it. Stobart's proposal is to propose validity arguments for different types and instances of assessment, such as for tests, performance assessment and the portfolio. Although, this is a somewhat pragmatic solution, what Moss *et al.* (2006: 117) would call a 'practical argument', it does make it possible to propose different theoretically underpinned validity arguments for the different cases considered. Adopting Stobart's approach, and inspired by Messick, a validity argument for each instance of the viva will entail exploring the following arguments:

- Exploring four components in each instance of the viva: evidence from the assessment (e.g. dissertation, performance of the candidate), constructs

used by the examiners (e.g. that the candidate argued in an inductive manner, concerned with constructs as subject/domain specific or communicative ability), social and personal consequences of the grade awarded (e.g. awarding a grade C in the Master in Education means that the candidate is not included in the community of education researchers and not allowed to enroll on a PhD) and the values of the examiners and how these have coloured the statements and grading of the examiners (e.g. regarding the candidate as too subjective and not viewing informants in an objective manner).

- Unitary judgment of the examiners combining the four components above (however, examiners might refuse to include a reflection upon their own values, and that their decision to award a particular grade can have social consequences for the future recruitment of educational researchers into the scientific community).
- Invalidity assertions on the basis of evidence of construct irrelevance (e.g. considering the candidate's attire in the viva and allowing it to contribute to the final grade) and evidence of construct under-representation (e.g. not considering the candidate's ability to argue in a logical, concise manner).

An alternative operationalisation has been proposed by Crooks *et al.* (1996) (and Kane *et al.*, 1999): a validity chain can be constructed, where if any one link in the chain is weak, then the whole assertion of validity for the particular test/assessment in question is weakened. Their validity chain has the following links: administration of the task, scoring, aggregation, generalisation, extrapolation, evaluation, decision with respect to standards, pedagogy decisions and finally impact.

Their understanding of each link and its accompanying validity judgment is more flexible than Messick. For example, with respect to impact, they note that 'validity is also reduced if the assessment processes are perceived to be unfair, involve more than temporary and manageable stress for participants, or substantially damage relationships among participants' (Crooks *et al.*, 1996: 279). They make no attempt to link invalidity to construct irrelevance. Their validity chain is also more openly concerned with the actual judgment that Messick purports to present as fundamental. Reliability is not omitted, but reduced or

rather incorporated in the link termed generalisation<sup>97</sup>. It is therefore subjected to a validity test when this link is judged. This breaks with the more usual procedure, where validity is judged according to how reliable the test may be.

The validity chain approach of Crooks and Kane could have been adopted in this dissertation, but it faces two criticisms, and because of these, an alternative perspective on validity arguments is developed (outlined above and also in the points below on judgments). Firstly, they are more reluctant to look for the ‘theoretical rationales’ called upon by Messick (1989: 13) to make validity assertions. They say the following, ‘performance assessments do not need to be interpreted in terms of theoretical constructs, but they can be’ (Kane *et al.*, 1999: 7). But, they make no attempt to provide such a theoretical construct, even though they suggest it is possible. Similarly, when talking about fairness and impact, no attempt is made to locate their interpretation in a theoretical framework, such as the one on justice inspired by Rawls, or Broadfoot’s (2005: 129) distinction between procedural justice (defensibility process), distributive justice (equality) and educational justice (the fertility of learning). The theoretical construct is therefore an option, but not a necessary one, especially if the goal is to describe rather than account for the observed performances in an assessment. Thus, to take a second example, they write, ‘to distinguish between the “borrow” and “non-borrow” tasks, it is necessary to know something about arithmetic, but a cognitive model (understood as a “theoretical rational” – SRD) of performance on subtraction problems is not needed (Kane, 2001: 334).’

Secondly, despite talking about their desire to provide a logical argumentation couched in a judgmental chain, no indication is given as to how they view judgments or that their own view of the validity chain may include a tacit theoretical understanding of judgments. They assume, without arguing for the assertion, that all evaluators are individuals able to freely choose between different validity arguments. This implies a rational choice view of human action in different game theory permutations (Dobson, 2006a). However, as critics of the rational choice game theory have noted (Otnes, 2004), rationality and the making

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<sup>97</sup> It is also possible to argue that reliability, as consistent use and confidence with the test/assessment is at stake in other links in their validity chain (administration of the task, scoring, aggregation) (Stobart in conversation 19.5.08).

of choices is more often than not limited in the real world – limited by our interests, prejudices and by others who may or may not be “free-riders”. This criticism still seems to hold for Kane’s later view (2006: 30-55) that four possible kinds of interpretative argument define the validation assertion (trait, theory-based, qualitative and decision interpretation) <sup>98</sup>.

## **Judgments**

Unitary judgments, Messick’s term for the manner in which evidence, constructs, social and personal consequences and values are combined, is a concept that carries with it the questionable assumption that a totality can be realised, when in fact this may not be the case. In the remainder of this chapter, a theoretical reflection upon judgments evident in the viva is undertaken in order to make examiner judgments a central component in a validity argument for the viva. The point being made is that unitary judgment is an imprecise concept, which underplays other important aspects of judgments and their relevance in an assessment situation.

Since 1982, the movement in secondary schools in Norway has been away from judgments rooted in a group related norm towards measuring the individual pupil’s competence according to predefined criteria in the specific subject (Vagle, 2005: 47). This has been combined with a move back to the view expressed in the 1939 national curriculum that schools support fixed knowledge outcomes and pupils should receive grades according to how much knowledge they have acquired in a simple input-output model. <sup>99</sup> But, as Vagle notes, there is reason to believe that tacit norm based assessment is still prominent in the practice of examiners with respect to ensuring shared standards achieved through informal discussion and co-operation between examiners (Vagle, 2005: 48, 64).

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<sup>98</sup> Kane’s interest in the argument-based approach to assessment actually pre-dates his 2006 contribution (Kane, 1992).

<sup>99</sup> Vagle also demonstrated that final year students in secondary school demonstrated better grades in the oral Norwegian exam as opposed to the written Norwegian exam. The reasoning she cites for this difference is: ‘pupils in the oral had the opportunity to document their understanding of the subject in dialogue with examiners and the opportunity to supplement and correct what they presented’ (Vagle, 2005: 77).

So too might be the case with respect to the viva in higher education. Examiners are socialised into making judgments based upon the tacit norms shared by colleagues holding the viva. For example, they might like to have as many A or B grades as possible because this will give the impression that the candidates have received excellent tuition. Accordingly, external examiners may feel pressure to award A or B grades in conformity with this view in the grade setting part of the pre-viva examiner meeting<sup>100</sup>. One internal examiner in a filmed Master in Education viva stated the following:

**Examiner Q** We see that other institutions in Norway have many A and B grades, perhaps an over-weight. And we are no exception.<sup>101</sup>

Bourdieu (1996) made a parallel argument, namely that examiners and teachers are socialised into categories of thought that they use in assessing their students. Without going as far as him, in arguing that the categories reflect the social backgrounds of the teachers/examiners/students, it is possible to see how some of the categories he suggested were used by the examiners in the filmed viva. The categories he suggested:

[...] brilliant/dull; effortless/laborious; distinguished/vulgar;  
cultured/scholastic; inspired/banal; original/common; lively/flat;  
fine/crude; noteworthy/insignificant; quick/slow; nimble/heavy;  
elegant/awkward...etc (Bourdieu; 1996:17).

The following terms (Norwegian in brackets), were found among Norwegian examiners in the filmed viva, and they paralleled several, but not all of Bourdieu's categories:

brilliant/boring (*glimerende/kjedelig*), banal/to the point (*banal/skarp*), elegant/clumsy (*elegant/klosetet*), lively/heavy (*levende/tung*), independent and mature (*selvstendig* and *moden*).

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<sup>100</sup> Research on grade setting in Norwegian higher education after the introduction of letter grades confirms the view that A-F grades are used more often in the under-graduate degrees, while in post-graduate master degrees grades A and B predominate (Universitets- og Høgskolerådet, 2006: 6)

<sup>101</sup> Vi ser at andre institusjoner i Norge har mange A og B karakter, kanskje en overvekt. Og vi er ikke et unntak.



These categories were voiced by different examiners in their judgments and it is possible to argue that they constitute a pool or reservoir of shared and tacitly accepted assessment terms; to be drawn upon/voiced when needed. These categories represent verbal descriptors and they are not all so clearly stated as Bourdieu's binary categories. Stated differently, they can be fuzzy (Sadler, 1987: 202), such that the difference and similarity between independent and mature, to take an example, is unclear. Of categories, only independent was stated in the grading sheet used by examiners (discussed in more detail below. See Appendix II for English translation of this grading sheet).

The judgments of the examiners are not necessarily invalidated because they uncritically accept and are in accordance with the tacit norms of the institution (e.g. to award as many A and B's as possible). On the contrary one validity argument for judgments voiced by examiners is precisely that they are in accordance with the (tacit) norms of the institution, which might have a rational foundation (e.g. a greater number of higher grades enhances the prestige of the tutors), even if it is rarely articulated. However, the opportunity for examiners to make decisions independent of the norms proposed and maintained by fellow examiners will be limited if the pressure to conform is great.

### **What goes on when judgments are made?**

However, it is also possible to propose a contrary argument that examiners in the viva might desire to move away from tacit norms in making their judgments. A grading sheet was used in the Master in Education viva; it contained a general qualitative descriptor of what should be present in the different grades A-F; with an A candidate showing evidence of 'an excellent performance, clearly outstanding...a high degree of independent thinking' and the F candidate at the other end of the scale lacking not only this, but an understanding of the topic of the dissertation. The same descriptor was used in all under and post-graduate examinations in the college (and nationally), whether written or viva<sup>102</sup>. It was not

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<sup>102</sup> Passed by the Norwegian Council for Higher Education, 6<sup>th</sup> August 2004. The grading sheet and descriptors are reproduced in the appendix.

subject specific, and provided only general guidelines<sup>103</sup>. Examiners in the viva had significant subjective leeway when it came to placing the candidate's work in a particular grade, and identifying the unique signature of the particular dissertation. Such leeway, highlights how the grading sheet specified broad criteria, but failed to explicitly state standards/thresholds of achievement. Moreover, even if criteria make reference to standards it is not always the case that standards are established, shared or explicitly stated (Sadler, 2005: 188)<sup>104</sup>.

### **Can we say in more detail what is taking place when examiners make their judgments?**

Judgments in the viva are characterised by the fact that they are reached through an inter-subjective discussion. Such inter-subjective discussions can be found in other forms of assessment, such as when examiner boards meet to discuss grades for written exams. Yet, they are not a necessity, and examiners might quite easily determine grades without discussing the merits of each candidate with fellow examiners<sup>105</sup>. The inter-subjective work done by examiners as they arrive at shared judgments can be studied by recourse to the tools of conversation analysis, especially since their final judgments are reached in the actual pre-viva and post-viva examiner meetings. This means that even if examiners have reached their own private judgments prior to the day of the viva, the examiner meetings represent the crucial inter-subjective event when these prior judgments are discussed and revised to reach the final, shared judgment and grade.

Note in the following extract from a pre-viva examiner meeting, how the supervisor was allowed to actively take part, even if declining to propose a provisional grade in the first instance. It must also be remembered that the pre-

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<sup>103</sup> In the Norwegian higher education debate has focused on regulating the presence of the external examiner by law (§3-9, 2 of Lov om Universiteter og Høgskoler, 2005), and not about whether national grading descriptors should be replaced by subject specific descriptors (Sensorordninger i Høyere Utdanning, 2005; Brandt and Stensaker, 2005). In addition, there has been debate on adopting European wide learning outcomes for different under-graduate and post-graduate degrees.

<sup>104</sup> Sadler's point is that use of criteria (as attributes and properties) often rest upon standards (fixed levels or thresholds of attainment). But the two are sometimes confused and the nature of their relation unclear.

<sup>105</sup> For example, in double blind marking there is not necessarily any shared verbal discussion between examiners – except if there is a disagreement in grades.

viva meeting had as its goal the agreement of a provisional grade on the submitted dissertation, which the outcome of the viva would confirm or change. This extract has already been presented in Chapter 5, but then, at that point, with the goal of understanding how the viva was talked into being. In other words, the same extract is read differently in the context of the present chapter.

Background for the extract: the previous cluster was terminated when examiner S introduced the grading discussion in an abrupt manner. It might be speculated that the participants felt ready for the grading discussion; they had discussed methodology, the theory of phenomenology at the beginning of the dissertation, and the paradigm discussion towards its end. And all had been raised for discussion.

Examiner S added that the candidate wrote well. However, before he could finish he was interrupted by the supervisor and had to wait to add ‘but the candidate didn’t use enough educational theory.’ Examiner O picked up the supervisor’s point, and reflected on the new letter grading system that had recently replaced the older numerical system. The supervisor declined to propose a provisional grade, and made it clear that the examiners had this responsibility. And yet, the supervisor was still drawn into the grading discussion. Examiner S said it would have been a B, if it had had more pedagogy, while examiner O, was of the opinion that the theory section was worth a B, but the presentation and discussion of the data was worth a lower grade:

- Supervisor** But what is your choice as the provisional grade O? ((looks to O as he speaks)) Is it C, is this really what we are looking at?
- Examiner O** [Ye::::s, Ye::::s  
That is what we are talking about] ((O is turning pages in the dissertation and does not look up))
- Supervisor** With the possibility of going up to B=  
**Examiner S** =B if he is convincing ((stretches himself))  
((looks to examiner O))
- Examiner O** yes=  
**Examiner S** =yes=  
**Supervisor** =C ((S writes it on a piece of paper in the middle of the table))<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> Hva foreslår du som foreløpig karakter? Er det C, det er det vi egentlig mener. Ja, ja, det er det vi mener. Med mulighet å gå opp til B

From this short extract and the accompanying background notes, in addition to the crucial role played by the supervisor, it is possible to see once again how the judgments reached are based upon a legitimacy grounded in different extrinsic narratives, such as pedagogy as a discipline and concerns with methodology. No reference was made to other dissertations and a norm for what might be accepted as a C, nor was there any reference to the grading sheet. And yet when the supervisor said, 'is this really what we are looking at?' and received confirmation from the others, the implication was that the participants were operating with a rarely articulated, tacit in-the-head normative view of what was a C grade.

Put differently, it might appear that the extrinsic narratives were added to justify this already intuitively felt view that the dissertation was worthy of a C grade. But it is hard to be sure. Perhaps the narratives came first, and the in-the-head normative view took shape afterwards based upon an accumulation of examiner experiences, and the formation of a 'growing consensus', perceived to exist between the examiners (Davis, 2006: 12).

Sadler, in a different context (formative assessment) has reflected upon the topic of examiner judgments. He suggested (1989: 132-133), in a well-known essay in assessment literature, that when examiners make qualitative judgments on the work of a student, two forms of judgments are possible. The judgments are either analytical (with pre-specified criteria and the search for their evidence in the work of the candidate) or configurational (with a holistic assessment first, and then its substantiation by referring to criteria which may or may not overlap)<sup>107</sup>. With configurational judgments, the criteria exist as a tacit pool of potential criteria, from which examiners select according to relevance to the case-at-hand. In other words, they become manifest when useful.

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B om han er overbevisende.

<sup>107</sup> The analytical vs. holistic distinction parallels the philosophy of mind distinction on knowledge in a child that can be parcelled into discrete testable units vs. knowledge connected to other knowledge in the mind of the knower and gaining its significance because of this' (Davis, 2006: 2-3). The holistic judgment is sometimes known under the term global (Sadler, 2008a).

Perhaps, it is possible to envisage a mixture of the two, or a commuting backwards and forwards between the two: analytical to configurational, and back again, just as in my terminology, there is a move backwards and forwards between extrinsic narratives and in-the-head normative views. Where Sadler looks to rational criteria held by examiners, I prefer to talk of extrinsic narratives that are similarly rational and can lend support to thinking in terms of criteria. Talk of criteria does not necessarily exclude talk of extrinsic narratives. Likewise, the configurational, characterised by its impressionistic or intuitive character (Sadler 2008) resembles in some senses what I have called the in-the-head normative view. Both draw upon what appears to be a tacit pool of criteria, which may not in the first instance be explicit.

Why is it so hard to pinpoint the kind of judgments used by examiners in vivas? In an argument that might equally apply to other forms of assessment, it might be because grading as an evaluative language game misconstrues its task, seeking to justify its prescriptive assertions on the basis of different language games, the interrogative and the report language games, both with denotative components. As Lyotard (1985: 27-29) has argued, the denotative component assumes the demonstration of the existence or non-existence of a state of affairs or a particular truth.<sup>108</sup> In the case of the viva, this is the view that the truth of a particular dissertation can be affirmed, read extracted, from the printed text and its oral defence. But, evaluative language games do not deal with such empirical

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<sup>108</sup> Lyotard (1985: 24, 27): "The just is not of the same genre as the true, but the word is still too fuzzy. It gains in precision if you mean by genre, genre of discourse, in the sense that Aristotle gives to the term to establish the difference between scientific and didactic discourse on the one hand, and dialectic, rhetoric, poetic discourse on the other." Aristotle says also that the judge is educated, and there are habits of judging – but this is no guarantee of just judgments. The judge is considered just on the basis of his/her judgments, not the case that because virtuous and just, the judgments are just. The judgment is a calculation: "I don't think that one can say that this calculation is theoretical. It is a calculation that bears upon objects for which there is no truth. In other words, there are statements about possibilities, and statements about possibilities are only statements of opinion. The judge relies upon opinion... We are in dialectics, and we are never in the *episteme*. I think that dialectics is all the prescriptive authorizes. I mean by this that dialectics cannot present itself as producing a model that would be a model that would be valid once and for all for the constitution of the social body. On the contrary, dialectics allows the judge to judge case by case... it is because each situation is singular. This singularity comes from the fact that we are in matters of opinion and not matters of truth. So much so that the *ethos* of the judge indicates that an ethics of reasonable distribution has been constituted. And the reason implied in this reasonableness has nothing to do with Plato's reason; it is not a reason that states being. It is a reason that is an understanding, in Weber's sense, for example (not at all a *Vernunft*; it is a *Verstand*). It is a calculating reason, as in strategy; it is a mode of strategy, but one in which the issue is not how to conquer but how to achieve parity between people. This is the difference. In

certainties. Nor is the appeal to some pre-defined and explicit set of grading criteria enough. The criteria on grading sheets must still be interpreted by users, and as such, they are vulnerable to the subjective opinions of examiners. These can, and do vary in a case-by-case manner, especially when the unique signature of the dissertation plays a role, resting as it does upon the topic of the dissertation, and the background competencies of the examiners (see chapter 5).

The point is simple, in the viva, examiners tend to move between language games with denotative components (through questions and answers and reports) and the evaluative language game when the grade is determined. But the data and hence practice, upon which each of these language games rest, is different and mutually exclusive. To recall Aristotle's (1981) famous distinction in Book IV of the *Nicomachean Ethics* between *episteme* (a scientific, theoretical knowledge denoting a fixed form of 'know-that', found in language games with denotative components) and *phronesis* (often translated as practical common-sense based upon wisdom, prudence and 'originative causes that are variable' and indicative of the evaluative language game), the content of the viva and its defence through questions and answers and reports, focuses upon looking for constancies and certainties, while the judgments made on grades rest upon variables, and change from case-to-case<sup>109</sup>.

Some (Orton, 1998) might resist this argument, arguing that it is necessary to move from the interrogative and report language games to evaluative language games, because if the latter are not enlisted in grading candidates, they will be treated as objects and not as humans, confusing "things" and "persons"<sup>110</sup>. Messick's combination of the evidential with values and consequences attempted to do precisely this; including the evaluative language game (associated with values and consequential) with the denotative language game (associated in particular with the evidential, but also with constructs). But, in reducing this

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every instance, one must evaluate relations: of force, of values, of quantities, and of qualities; but to evaluate them there are no criteria, nothing but opinions."

<sup>109</sup> My interpretation of Aristotle is broadly in line with Dunne (1993: 259), who argues that *phronesis* deals with particular cases, while *episteme* and *techne* deal with general rules. The boundaries between the three forms of knowledge can also be debated, if for example deliberative excellence, considered typical of *phronesis* has intuitive and reflective (know-that theoretical) components (Åsvoll, 2008: 87)

<sup>110</sup> Orton's phrase.

combination to a unitary judgment, he risked neglecting and overlooking the difficulty of their combination and whether it was at all possible. Markus (1989), one commentator, has suggested that Messick remained trapped in the impossible project of attempting a synthesis between the realist evidential (the *is* or *that*) and constructivist consequential (the *ought*). This, despite Messick's (1998: 36) rejoinder that:

If values are justifiable, they are akin to facts, and the tension between the evidential and consequential bases of validity is resolved.

Perhaps there is no answer to this dilemma, when framed as above <sup>111</sup> in the manner of discontinuous, discrete language games. The danger with such an argument however, is that examiner judgments are no longer seen to rest upon what is affirmed in the particular dissertations and their connection with theoretical knowledge (episteme), but upon the opinions of examiners and their interests and competencies. I have no definitive response to make to such a danger, other than to say that it is worthy of debate. With respect to the doctoral viva in England, there has already been a limited debate upon precisely the “chummy” behaviour of examiners as the key independent variable (Hartley and Fox, 2002; Wallace and Marsh, 2001) and this might reflect their subjective interests.

It is important therefore, to be sensitive to the manner in which the transition between the denotative language game and the evaluative language is negotiated, without reducing one to the other in the manner of stating that the *ought* (evaluative) is irreversibly connected with the *that* (denotative) and vice versa.

### **A validity argument for the viva**

This chapter has argued that validity, rather than reliability and generalisability should be in the foreground with respect to a meta-reflection on the validity of the viva as a form of assessment and social practice.

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<sup>111</sup> Inspired by Aristotle.

A validity argument for the viva as a social practice draws upon general reflections on the debate on validity and assessment, and applies them to the case of the viva. The argument of this chapter has been that Messick's work is the source of many useful points that can be incorporated into such a validity argument. Firstly, he draws attention to the following: evidence from the dissertation and the candidate's oral performance, constructs used by examiners, social and personal consequences and values of examiners. Secondly, Messick considers how these points are combined in a unitary judgment. The interesting issue with respect to the viva entails exploring how and whether or not examiners combine these points in their judgments. Finally, Messick explored threats to validity, specifically construct under-representation and construct irrelevance.

What makes the validity argument of the viva as a social practice different to the validity argument for other forms of assessment such as the portfolio, written exams, performance assessments and multiple choice, is the manner in which the judgments of the examiners are reached inter-subjectively and through discussion. This does not mean that inter-subjective verbal discussion is not a component in other forms of assessment (e.g. there can be examiner meetings to achieve shared standards in the marking of written papers), but in the viva it plays a central and leading role. Simply and importantly put, the viva is a social practice characterised by the inter-subjective judgmental work undertaken by its participants.

In school development research (Paavola et al. 2004) there is much talk of the development of *learning communities* when learning is shared amongst teachers seeking to develop the school<sup>112</sup>. Researchers have followed efforts to maintain these communities over time in situations of high teacher turnover and with reference to the possibility of extending their membership to enhance social capital (Stoll and Seashore Louis, 2007). There is a parallel in the context of the viva, in terms of the manner in which communities of judgments are achieved through discussion by examiners in each particular instance of the viva. A Norwegian word for this is *tolkningsfelleskap*, meaning a community of



interpretation and it is fitting as a description of the viva's inter-subjective judgmental work. This does not of course mean that the examiners always immediately agree, as illustrated in the examiner who withdrew the provisional A grade to agree on a C grade (see Chapter 5). But, as this chapter has argued, there are instances when a tacit in-the-head normative view is made verbally explicit and shared, such that it forms the basis for discussion and negotiation, often with the accompaniment of extrinsic narratives.

Accordingly, the argument is that the validity of judgments used by examiners in the viva can have several components, rather than simply the (unitary) judgment proposed by Messick. These being, a reference to socialisation into in-the-head norms common to judgments in the examining institution, judgments rooted in extrinsic narratives, judgments that can be either analytical or configurational, and a movement from denotative language games to evaluative language games. In my opinion, there can be different mixes of these kinds of judgments in vivas. Secondly, it might be argued that the in-the-head tacit norms are invalid because they are not articulated and hence can decrease, rather than increase the transparency of the viva. But, this is to ignore that there might be cases where these tacit norms may possess their own rational foundation<sup>113</sup>, even if rarely articulated. In sum, I would contend that it is wise to operate with a somewhat eclectic bag of judgmental components and to assign validity or invalidity to them on the basis of individual case or instance of the viva.

This brings me to the main point in this chapter. My contention being that a validity argument for the viva cannot be proposed in a once and for all manner, such that it universally applies to all instances of a particular form of viva. Instead, in keeping with the view that validity is not a fixed property of the forms of assessment, it is rather the case that a process of validation is required, where observation and reflection on the four components suggested by Messick is required, along with a focus upon judgments. Additionally, it is important to be sensitive to the moves and twists as transitions are negotiated between denotative and evaluative language games.

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<sup>112</sup> In this tradition knowledge is constructed rather than acquired. This is the social constructivist view of knowledge where the focus on the individual as a container is down-toned.

## Chapter 7

### Exploring the Validity Argument – Some Empirical Examples

They are exposed to judgment and assessment [...] they must control themselves the whole time.

*In interview, Niels Bay*<sup>114</sup>

This chapter has as its goal, the refinement and application of the validation tool developed in the previous chapter, to case study data. Three empirical examples will be discussed and compared: an undergraduate viva in Travel and Tourism, under-graduate viva in an advanced program in education and the filmed master viva (introduced in Chapter 5). Similarities and differences between these vivas will be identified in order to answer the question: to what extent were the constructs, judgments and other components of the validity model different in content and complexity, as the cases progressed from the introductory undergraduate level course, to the post-graduate level?

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<sup>113</sup> I am referring to the point about the rational foundation of the tacit norms of the institution, that A and B grades enhance the status of the institution (see earlier in Chapter 6).

<sup>114</sup> De er under bedømmelse og vurdering...så de skal hele tiden stramme sig an (my translation from the Danish). Niels Bay in interview with Flemming Røgilds, 14.4.06. Bay is a well-known social educator in Copenhagen, renowned for his points reward system used in his work with disaffected youth.

## **Refining and elaborating the validity argument model: some preliminary points**

In the previous chapter, a model was proposed to identify and analyse validity arguments in the social practice of the viva. It had the following components:

- constructs used by examiners,
- social and personal consequences
- values of examiners
- denotative and evaluative language games
- judgments
- evidence in the form of the dissertation, or submitted work, and the candidate's oral performance

The argument explored in this chapter is that the 'fitness for purpose' of these components will vary for each instance of the viva. It is therefore to be expected that a certain mix of these components will be appropriate for each case.

Centre-pin to Messick's conception of validation were constructs and how they could be theoretically justified. But, can more be said of constructs considered pertinent to the viva? As noted in Chapter 2, Trafford and Leshem (2002) referred to the domain/subject based construct of doctorateness in UK doctorate vivas. For them, this entailed evidence of the scholarly level of the dissertation, transparency of its arguments, and topics chosen by the candidate to indicate sufficient complexity. Levine and McGuire (1970) highlighted the psychological/cognitive constructs in medical vivas (e.g. certain kinds of rational thought (inductive reasoning, problem solving, arriving at inferences) and communicative ability. Similarly, in the cases that follow evidence of constructs of communicative ability and cognitive ability will be sought. By communicative ability, it is meant confidence in dealing with different language games and the transitions between them.<sup>115</sup> By cognitive ability, I mean using different forms of rationality, such as inductive reasoning, arriving at inferences, and so on. In this chapter, I will place less of an emphasis on constructs as domain/subject-based knowledge of the discipline in question. Nevertheless, to some extent it is always imminent in the

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<sup>115</sup> This might also be defined as 'mastering relevant communicative genres' (page 30 in [www.regjering.no/upload/KD/Hoeringssdok/2007/200703620/raqpport\\_forslag\\_til\\_nasjonalt\\_ammeverk\\_for\\_kvalifikasjoner\\_i\\_ho](http://www.regjering.no/upload/KD/Hoeringssdok/2007/200703620/raqpport_forslag_til_nasjonalt_ammeverk_for_kvalifikasjoner_i_ho))

forms of reasoning, as knowledge of the topics/narratives under discussion during the viva.

Evidence as a component in the validation process is, in the case of the viva, what the candidates say in the course of the viva about their pre-submitted assignments/dissertations, not merely in response to questions (interrogative language game), but also in the course of the report language game (e.g. denotative statements, as when the submitted work is presented verbally). Also, relevant evidence in the validation process is what the examiners say in the evaluative language game, as well as the emphasis they place upon what is said in the course of the greeting and parting language game. As indicated in the previous chapter, it is important to follow the transitions made by examiners between the evaluative and denotative language games.

With respect to judgments, the focus will be upon the possibility of identifying the rarely articulated in-the-head norms supporting judgments. Secondly, as argued in the previous chapter, different arguments exist to account for what is going on when judgments are made: analytical, configuration and extrinsic. In previous chapters, the focus was upon developing an understanding of the role played by legitimacy through narratives and in this chapter this focus will be retained. As a consequence, less of an emphasis will be placed upon the analytical and configurative.

Few initial refinements and clarifications are required of the other components: Social consequences have personal consequences and can be operationalised as a specific grade guaranteeing entry or non-entry into either a profession/work, or further study. In other words, the extent to which the form of assessment is either high stakes or low stakes. Construct under-representation refers to not measuring enough of the desired construct. Construct irrelevance is understood to have social consequences, in the sense implied by Messick (1989) e.g. letting skin colour influence final grades. This means that I am not adopting Cronbach's (in Moss, 1992:236) wider and less precise definition of social consequences: 'tests that impinge on the rights and life chances of individuals are inherently disputable'. Values refer to such things as a candidate who is too subjective in her or his

views, or the opposite, such as an examiner who uncritically believes in positivistic science and an objective stance.

In the model outlined in the previous chapter and also in the cases to follow, judgments play the key, centre-pin role for the validation of the viva. The interesting comparative question is: to what extent were the constructs, judgments and other components of the validity model different and more demanding in the move from an introductory semester in a BA (Case I), to a more advanced course in a BA (case II), and finally, to a post-graduate master degree viva (case III)?

Case I was in the discipline of Travel and Tourism, while the other cases were from the discipline of education <sup>116</sup>. What the vivas shared was an academic character; meaning by this that despite the disciplinary difference the same language games were found to be present. This suggests that adequate grounds for comparison existed.

### **Case 1: The Travel and Tourism viva**

77 students had completed four assignments (on tourism history, travel policy, travel sociology and geography; two were group assignments and two individual assignments) in the BA in Travel and Tourism, and they were each put in the student's portfolio for summative assessment at the end of the first semester. One group assignment and one individual assignment (from the two group and two individual assignments) were selected at random by the lecturers from the portfolio, and after the Christmas vacation, the students sat a group and an individual viva covering each piece of work. On the basis of the two vivas they received a final grade between A and E, where each of the selected assignments were weighted 50% towards the final grade. The grades were not high stake in the sense of determining entrance to either year II of the degree or work. Nevertheless, they did constitute a 6<sup>th</sup> of the final grade in the 3 year BA and therefore possessed a summative value, with personal consequences.

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<sup>116</sup> The Travel and Tourism bachelor was an academic program and a national professional certification did not exist.

Eight group vivas and 31 individual vivas were observed, along with the common pre-viva meeting held by the six examining lecturers. They constituted three examining committees with two lecturers in each committee. One of the 6 lecturers was from an external research institution, and he rotated between the three committees in the course of the examination period, which lasted 3 days.

These vivas were not filmed. Instead, notes were taken, and the researcher was positioned at the back of the room behind the students on each occasion. The instances of the viva were selected such that the researcher could observe each of the lecturers for a minimum of two group vivas, and the accompanying individual viva; as each member of the group took a separate viva. Each group viva and the individual vivas that followed for group members lasted two hours in total<sup>117</sup>. This average used was dependent on the number of members in the group (3-5 students).

In these vivas evidence was of two kinds: firstly, a written group and individual assignment, which examining pairs had read and reached a common grade upon prior to the viva. Secondly, there was the verbal performance of the candidates in the vivas, which was used for the purpose of adjusting the preliminary grades in the group and individual vivas. Together, the submitted assignments and two vivas constituted a functional whole (see Chapter 3).

On one occasion, a candidate performed poorly in the individual viva. The examiners had said the following after she left the room:

**Examiner W:** Let's wait until we have examined the others in the group before we decide her grade.

**Examiner B:** Could be a D if we are kind. <sup>118</sup>

Of note, is the manner in which the individual candidate was explicitly compared with the performance of the other candidates who were to take their individual vivas. This kind of comparison was not an unusual occurrence.

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<sup>117</sup>The longest was 2 hours and 50 minutes and the shortest was one hour.

<sup>118</sup> La oss vente til vi har eksaminert andre i gruppen før vi bestemmer hennes karakter. Kunne bli en D om vi er snill

After giving the students the opportunity to give an account of the work process on the group assignment (a report language game), the examiners pursued one of two strategies: they addressed questions to the whole group, such that any of the group members could answer. After several questions if a group member was silent, she/he would be asked a question directly. The second strategy was to first ask a question to each student and only afterwards address questions to the whole group. Either way, an individual's weak presentation in the group viva, might influence the group grade:

**Examiner Ø:** Student J was weak and she said little unless pushed (3.0) unlike the others in the group

**Examiner H:** Therefore the group is on a C grade. <sup>119</sup>

The focus on the level of verbal activity in a group viva was indicative of examiners operating with a construct of communicative ability. The construct of communicative ability had additional dimensions: One examiner, unlike the others, liked to ask questions requiring an evaluative answer, such as, 'why have you written about cultural-based resources?' <sup>120</sup>, rather than questions requiring a descriptive character, such as, 'you have written about value conflict in tourism, what is a value conflict?' <sup>121</sup>. In other words, this examiner explored the ability of students to communicate by changing between evaluative and denotative language games.

Examiners shared a cognitive construct. It was revealed in their desire that the students had to show the ability to verbally reflect upon individual examples of travel and tourism, and connect them to theories that were either laid out in their assignments, or if lacking, had been covered in the lectures/reading list during the semester and could therefore be the topic of questions. Put differently, the students were expected to demonstrate the ability to move inductively from an empirical example, to generalisation, and thereafter to a theory or model. Another aspect of cognitive ability was revealed in the manner in which the examiner opened each viva by asking the students, 'what could you have done better in hindsight?' This caused the students to reflect upon how they had chosen to solve

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<sup>119</sup> Student J var svak og hun sa lite hvis vi ikke presset henne ikke som de andre i gruppen. Derfor er gruppen på en C.

<sup>120</sup> Hvorfor har du skrevet om kulturbasert ressurser?

the assignment, and could have solved it differently. A cognitive construct of problem solving was therefore connected with one of learning.

With respect to social consequences, among the students there were two from Iceland. If their ethnic background and if their poor use of Norwegian language had influenced the examiners, it might have been an illustration of construct irrelevance. In both cases this was not manifest or evident:

**Examiner T:** What Scandinavian language did you learn at school as your second language?

**Student A:** Danish.

**Examiner T:** We won't penalise you.<sup>122</sup>

Nor was their evidence of construct under-representation. However, a student who wrote an email to one of the examiners after the viva might have experienced precisely this. The student wrote: 'Other groups experienced questions on what they had written, we talked mostly about what we hadn't written. I think the exam was at times unfair.'<sup>123</sup>

The examiners were keen to find evidence of students who used travel and tourism theories, and this might be interpreted as evidence of the scientific, knowledge-based values, as opposed to personal experiences. However, because this was the first semester of the BA, and the examiners expectations were more modest, and they were more concerned to instill an understanding of what might constitute a scientific perspective. Interestingly, the examiners had revealed their own values in the course of individual interviews about one of the group assignments, a PowerPoint presentation of a planned 10 day travel tour to a selected country in the world, and its subsequent assessment as one of the group vivas (Dobson, 2006:109).<sup>124</sup> They had said the following:

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<sup>121</sup> Du har skrevet om verdi konflikter i reiseliv, hva er en verdi konflikt?

<sup>122</sup> Hvilke skandinaviske språk lærte du som andre språk?

Dansk

Vi skal ikke straffe deg.

<sup>123</sup> Andre grupper gjorde en gjennomgang i det de hadde skrevet, snakket vi mest om alt vi ikke hadde skrevet, jeg syntes eksamen til tider var noe urettferdig.

<sup>124</sup> Each group was allocated a country by the lecturer.



The PowerPoint assessment is a bluff. You might be able to give pass or fail, but to award grades between A and F...

The PowerPoint assignment is a sleeping assignment, not a real one.

We have had no real discussion about assessing the PowerPoint presentations.

PowerPoint assessment ... I don't put any value upon it ... it is at best, a form of training.

Students learn from each other when they listen to each other's PowerPoint presentations. But some are a little too fancy.

Of interest is the manner in which the examiners were to some extent skeptical about the value – read scientific value – of the PowerPoint presentation and its subsequent assessment in a group viva. It was to all intents and purposes a form of training/learning, or simply a 'bluff'.

As argued in the previous chapter, in making their judgments, the examiners revealed the social practice of the viva to be an inter-subjective phenomenon. In the travel and tourism viva, the final verdicts were reached quickly in most cases during each post-viva discussion. On occasions, one examiner would say a grade, and the affirmative nod of the other's head would be enough. This reflected the fact that almost 100 vivas were to take place, and there was little time for lengthy grading discussions, and furthermore, the examiners were clear that this was the first semester in the BA and the knowledge of the students would be limited.

The swiftness of the grading reflected something else: four of the five internal examiners had worked together for close on 20 years. They possessed a rarely articulated in-the-head normative agreement about the grades. This was evident when the fifth internal examiner, who was new to the academic field and a doctoral student in the institution, examined with the other four examiners. He let them take the lead in proposing judgments and rarely disagreed with their grade proposal. In the interview after the vivas, he said that they had not explained how they arrived at their grades, or what was to constitute an A or F.

However, not all the grading discussions were quick. When they were longer, lasting up to five minutes the ground had been prepared by the pre-viva discussion when the preliminary grade had been established.<sup>125</sup> The examiners in such cases navigated between the six grades A to F by giving the students the preliminary grade of for example B- or B+ if they were unsure about the status of the B. The following expressions were used to qualify these distinctions:

Weak (*svak*) B, strong (*sterk*) B, on the border (*på vippen*) between B and C, clear (*klar*) B.

The new examiner struggled to gain access to precisely this set of grading distinctions and the transitions between them; therefore, feeling he possessed few options, other than to observe and follow the lead of the experienced examiner.

In the viva, the examiners looked to see if the students could justify assertions in their assignments by appealing to the reading list and the theories it contained. Put differently, these were the source of extrinsic narratives. One such narrative commonly sought was the tourism development model developed by Travis (1989) and taught on several occasions throughout the semester. The examiner judgments therefore reflected the degree to which the student had evoked a specific narrative.

Summarising, the travel and tourism viva was valid as a social practice through a particular emphasis on communicative (moving between language games) and cognitive constructs (problem solving, inductive reasoning), and judgments that were a mix of in-the-head normative judgments and appeals to extrinsic narratives. Construct irrelevance and under-representation played a marginal role in this particular form of viva.

## **Case II: The advanced course in education**

The advanced course was entitled Education and Modern Society (*Pedagogikk og det moderne*); its goal was philosophical, as opposed to teaching practice oriented, and introduced the educational relevance of Foucault, Fanon, Nietzsche, Kristeva

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<sup>125</sup> The examining pairs of examiners had met before the common examiner meeting .

and others. Like the vivas in the previous case, the vivas in this advanced course in education, taken at the end of year II, contributed to the final BA grade in the degree. They were thus of a similar stake value and of similar length (20-30 minutes). However, the level was different, with the advanced course reserved for those who had already completed the foundation year in education.

In the year in which data was collected, 13 students took the viva and five were filmed. A focus group after the viva was also filmed, which allowed a more flowing conversation than a traditional research interview and encouraged different language games, such as story telling, disappointment, teasing and so on (Wilkinson, 1997).<sup>126</sup>

Permission was obtained to film the post-viva examiner meetings immediately after each viva, but it was refused for the pre-viva examiner meetings when the preliminary grade for the 13 vivas were decided. The external examiner was in favour, but not the internal examiner, who said, 'the pre-viva examiner meeting is private and this privacy should not be broken.' Of interest in this connection is the departmental meeting some months before when the researcher asked 10 lecturers, including the internal examiner above, for permission to film some of the education vivas that year. The lecturers had divided into two camps, with those against saying the following:

**Lecturer T:** To begin with I am sceptical (2.0) technology will disturb the

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<sup>126</sup> The assumption commonly made is that the underlying epistemology of the focus group and interviews in general are based upon the researcher participants talk 'providing a "means of access" to something that lies behind or beyond it' (Wilkinson, 1997:187). Wilkinson is uncomfortable with this view and suggests that the epistemology of the focus group should be regarded as talk that constitutes the social world of participants on a moment-by-moment basis. This moves discussion to the realm of conversation analysis with its interest in talk-in-interaction. In the present context, this is to regard the focus group on the viva as the constitution of knowledge that is valid only within the context of the focus group and not beyond it.

I shall adopt a position mid-way between Wilkinson's own preference for a socially constructed view of knowledge, and those she seeks to criticize for a correspondence theory of knowledge. By this I mean that the focus group will be regarded as both a site in which knowledge of the viva is constructed, and also as a site for reflections on the experience of actually occurring viva. With respect to the former site, the knowledge relates to the context of reflections limited to the context of a focus group. With respect to the latter site, the viva as a reality existing outside of the focus group is admitted and it requires research of actual viva to explore the assertions made by the participants in the focus group. The position adopted is therefore what has been called, 'affirmative post-modernist' (Gubrium and Holstein, 2003: 9), where a commitment to objectivist description of reality is retained (viva have been filmed for analysis), while admitting at the same time, its dependence on 'a reflexive awareness of language and the different rhetorical forms' it can take, or in my terminology, limited to and dependent upon different language games.

situation for the candidate.<sup>127</sup>

**Lecturer Æ:** We have to think of the legal question (3.0) we risk complaints after vivas because the film will disturb the candidate (2.0) We must have written permission from each individual (3.0) This kind of research on us has never happened before.<sup>128</sup>

Those in favour supported the following lecturer's position:

**Lecturer K:** This is nothing new. Out in the world people have researched on their own activity for years. (2.0) If we won't adopt a positive attitude to this research (4.0) if we can't accept that we are researched upon this is wrong.<sup>129</sup>

The last mentioned position, voiced by one of the longest serving lecturers in the department carried the day, and it was agreed that the department was to support the research, but individual lecturers could decline to be filmed if they wished.

The internal examiner in case II adopted a compromise position, allowing the viva and post-viva meeting to be filmed, but not the pre-viva meeting. This might be interpreted to mean that the pre-viva examiner meeting was the most crucial arena for grade setting. But, since the viva and post-viva meeting provided the opportunity for grade adjustment, they were not without value.

As in Case I, the evidence for the validity argument was the functional whole created by a submitted assignment (in this case, a 2 week home essay on a self-selected topic from within the boundaries set by the course's curriculum) and the viva. In the focus group the following statement was voiced, 'we didn't receive any feedback on the essay in the viva and most of the time it was questions on the reading list.'<sup>130</sup> This would suggest less of a weighting towards the assignment in the viva. On viewing the filmed vivas this was supported when the examiners stated clearly at the beginning of the vivas, that since they had read and provisionally graded the assignment, it was important to gain insight into the candidate's understanding of reading list material not used in the assignment. And yet, in opposition to this view, for two candidates the questions in their respective

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<sup>127</sup> Er i utgangspunkt skeptisk. Teknologi vil forstyrre eksamen situasjon for kandidaten

<sup>128</sup> Vi må tenke på rettssikkerhet. Vi risikerer klager etter muntlig på grunn av filming som forstyrrer kandidaten. Vi må ha skriftlig tillatelse fra hver enkelt. Slike forskning har ikke skjedd på oss selv før.

<sup>129</sup> Det er ikke noe nytt. Ut i verden folk har forsket på egen virksomhet i mange år. Om vi ikke skulle stille oss positiv til forskning. At vi ikke tåler at vi ble forsket på er feil.

<sup>130</sup> Vi fikk ikke tilbakemelding på oppgaven og stort sett pensum spørsmål

vivas focused on the topics chosen in their respective assignments. In other words, the view of the viva as a functional whole was substantiated, but the emphasis given to the assignment varied.

With respect to constructs a difference to the travel and tourism viva was immediately apparent. It was not so much problem solving, but rather identifying problems and their causes which were a sought after construct. Nor were the examiners primarily interested in examples and the movement through induction to generalisation and theorisation. Instead, they were interested in candidates who could demonstrate the ability to argue in a deductive manner using the work of different theorists. Here is an example of an exchange:

**Internal ex. R:** The Enlightenment project (3.0) Locke is important what does he say in *An Essay on Human Understanding*. He is the founder of modern education. Can you say something about this?

**Candidate Ø:** Yes yes ((smiles to examiner S)) he means we are objects governed by reason.

**Examiner S:** Are we born with ready to use soft-ware?

**Candidate Ø:** We are born with tabula rasa.<sup>131</sup>

This cognitive construct of deduction was revealed in an evaluative and interrogative language game. Other language games were also evident, such as the report and parting language games. Candidates were expected to recognise and switch between these games. Case I and case II therefore, showed a similar emphasis on a communicative construct.

Personal social consequences were evident to the students because of a loop-hole in the college rules. If students selected to write a slightly longer assignment, it could be used as a BA dissertation, and the course, normally worth 30 credits would be worth 45 credits.<sup>132</sup> According to the students in the focus group, 'the viva didn't mirror the verbal form and focus on the course's teaching.' The lecturers confirmed the emphasis on the importance of dialogue with students in the course of teaching. This might suggest the threat of construct under-representation if it was desired, and yet notably in the opinion of students in the

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<sup>131</sup> Opplysningsprosjekt...Locke er viktig...hva sier han i *Essay on Human Understanding*. Han er grunnleggeren til det moderne pedagogikk. Kan du si noe om dette?  
Ja ja vi er objekter som styres av fornuften mener han  
Er vi født med ferdig program vare?  
Vi er født med tabula rasa.

viva. However, the viva is a verbal form of assessment, and this in itself means that the student will be encouraged to engage in dialogue. The examiners also praised an ‘offensive approach’ in the viva adopted by one of the candidates. It seems therefore, that verbal ability was represented and valued as a construct. As none of the candidates had a non-Norwegian ethnic identity or possessed different phenotypical traits, no evidence of construct irrelevance was found on this count. It did however, exist in terms of enthusiasm, see below.

As in the Travel and Tourism viva, the examiners looked for evidence of extrinsic narratives upon which to base their judgments. The examiners drew upon a shared pool of questions in order to encourage the students to evoke these narratives. They took turns asking the different questions, each rooted in a particular extrinsic narrative:

- Mead’s narrative of self
- Nietzsche and the resentment (*krenkelsen*) narrative
- Foucault’s narrative of power
- Rousseau’s educational paradox narrative
- Locke and the enlightenment narrative

Depending upon the detail provided by the candidates, the examiners positioned and graded them along an axis: those lacking a reflective awareness of the chosen topic were seen to use ‘too many headline captions’ (*for mye overskrift*), while at the other end of the scale were those who demonstrated a ‘fiery, lightning sharp understanding’ (*brennende forståelse*). This scale was shared by the examiners, and suggests a rarely articulated in-the-head normative judgment of what constituted an A grade, with ‘too many captions’ receiving the grade C or below.

The post-viva examiner meetings were longer than the Travel and Tourism vivas, providing the opportunity for more detailed examiner discussions. The examiners in the post-viva examiner meeting moved from the interrogative language games with denotative concerns, to the evaluative grade setting language game. The

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<sup>132</sup> A Norwegian BA requires 180 credits, 60 normally taken per year.

following extract, which focuses in particular upon the evaluative language game, also contains the denotative language game:

**Internal ex. R:** She shows enthusiasm

**Examiner S:** She has read the reading list but doesn't show a fiery lightening sharp understanding.

**Internal ex. R:** She cannot be given better than a D (4.0) if she is then everybody will have to be given a C

**Examiner S:** Her essay had a lot of material (2.0) I had written C to D ((that is before the provisional grade was fixed to a D))<sup>133</sup>

The examiners used evidence of denotative language games (the 'what is', Aristotle's *episteme*, found in the candidate's replies and assignment e.g. 'essay had a lot of material') to support the evaluative judgments of the 'ought to be' grade (Aristotle's *phronesis*) in the evaluative language game. But, they took into account among other things, candidate enthusiasm, and if they had read a considerable amount of the reading list material. This indicated that it was more than simply the denotative supporting the evaluative, and in a sense reducing the latter to the former. Particular and variable case-by-case components were central, such as enthusiasm and the amount of reading.

The evaluative language game therefore drew upon the interrogative, but added something extra. To simply call it a unitary judgment (as Messick does), is to miss the movement between language games and the role played by particular, variable elements (e.g. enthusiasm). Enthusiasm might also be considered an example of construct irrelevance, in that it exceeds, and is irrelevant to cognitive constructs.

When the candidate in the extract above was called in again to receive his grade the examiners said the following:

**Examiner S:** We are taking you up from D to C

**Examiner R:** You must learn to escape from your own head and connect your ideas to what you have read. Develop personal knowledge on the basis of what you have read.

**Candidate:** I have tried to think myself.<sup>134</sup>

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<sup>133</sup> Hun viser at hun er engasjert  
Har lest pensum men ikke brennende forståelse  
Kan ikke få bedre en D om hun gjør det vil alle få C  
Hun hadde mye stoff. Jeg hadde henne på C til D  
La hun få en C

With these comments the examiners were able to communicate two things about the viva: firstly, that it could provide an opportunity for learning and the communication of learning. Secondly, in saying that knowledge could be developed on the basis of what you have read, implied that it was a knowledge that it was not derived from subjective experience. In other words, it was objective and not subjective with the added implication, that the examiner's values were those of the objective, social scientist.

To summarise, in case II the students were aware that the subject was an 'alarmingly theoretical' (*skremmende teoretisk*) subject, as one of the candidates put it. This might have been the reason for the weight placed upon deductive, as opposed to inductive cognitive constructs. However, it cannot be ruled out that the move from induction to deduction was connected with the fact that this was an advanced, as opposed to an introductory course on a BA. Additionally, it might be a mistake to believe that the difference was related to Travel and Tourism's greater interest in examples. Education as a discipline also makes reference to an array of examples. Another point of comparative note is that even though an advanced course viva was of similar length to a first year viva, the time devoted to and number of points made in the post-viva meeting was greater. In this sense, the social practice was different, and along with the different form of cognitive reasoning, it appeared to be more complex, placing greater demands on the candidates and examiners.

### **Case III: The post-graduate viva in Education**

In case III, the filmed post-graduate viva introduced in Chapter 5 will be revisited. This time however, the focus will be upon identifying validity arguments. The Master in Education viva is a high stakes form of assessment, more so than the under-graduate viva, because a grade C or below, meant entry into a doctoral course of study was prohibited. Thus, one of the candidate's expressed

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<sup>134</sup> Vi tar deg opp fra D til C

Du må lærer å komme ut av eget hode og knytter ideer til det du har lest

Utvikle personlig kunnskap på bakgrunn av det du har lest

Jeg har prøvd å tenke selv.



disappointment to the examiners when he gained a C, and felt his performance in the viva warranted a B.

As in the under-graduate viva, evidence for the validity argument in the post-graduate viva entailed a piece of written work (the dissertation of 50,000 words) and performance in the viva. However, it had an additional element: a piece of empirical research (unless the dissertation was entirely theoretical/philosophical). This was important because the functional whole of dissertation and viva was enlarged, providing the opportunity for the candidate and examiners to reflect upon methodological choices and issues. This opportunity was lacking in the under-graduate cases.

This methodology component also exerted an influence on the constructs, which examiners looked for in the viva and in the dissertation. As noted in Chapter 5, methodological issues represented one of a limited number of extrinsic narratives found in all of the filmed vivas (along with a meta-reflection on education as a discipline and clarifying roles and procedures). All dissertations and vivas with empirical data devoted a chapter to justify why they had chosen either quantitative or qualitative methodologies. To some extent, the more theoretical dissertations still had some discussion of methodological choices. The candidates also reflected upon induction and deductive approaches in the dissertations, and were called upon to do this again in the viva.

This means that the cognitive construct sought was not simply inductive or deductive, as in the under-graduate viva. Instead, a meta-reflection over both of these approaches was called upon, even if the candidates chose one or the other. In 3 of the filmed vivas, the examiners held severe reservations about the methodological choices made by the candidates and the resulting empirical data. On the one hand, this concern with methodology is to be praised, if it ensures that the candidates become more stringent and self-critical researchers. On the other hand, there is a danger of construct under-representation, if the examiners over-focus on methodology, creating a methodological fetishism, and ignoring other equally important constructs in the dissertation. This methodological interest also revealed the examiner's belief in scientific values and ensuring objectivity. This

belief was something also evident, although to a lesser degree in the considerably briefer under-graduate viva.

All the filmed pre-viva examiner meetings began with the supervisor telling, in a report language game, about the candidate's work throughout the year, namely about their seriousness, their ambitions with the dissertation and in general what kind of people they were. Obviously, the danger of partiality lies in such a report. In the general interviews of 16 Norwegian academics on experiences of the vivas (of whom several were also examiners or supervisors in the filmed viva), all without exception argued that the supervisor should be present in the pre-viva (providing background insight into the candidates and making them feel at ease through their presence), the viva (asking questions) and post-viva examiner meeting. But only one said they should participate in the grade setting cluster of the pre-viva and post-viva. They were thus aware of this danger of partiality in grade setting. However, in all of the filmed vivas the supervisors were actively drawn into/invited to take part in the grade setting, even if they had voiced their reluctance at the beginning of the pre-viva meetings.

In terms of the validity argument model, the threat of partiality heightened the possibility of construct irrelevance because points made in the report game or grade setting by the supervisor might exert an influence on the other examiners and their grading. To say as the supervisor did in one of the filmed viva, that the candidate 'was courageous to choose these research questions' is already to remark on something positive about the student's dissertation without this necessarily being the case in terms of level of argument. Moreover, taking into account personality components such as courageous will always rest upon a subjective assessment of the candidate that departs from constructs rooted in cognitive reasoning or communicative ability.

Turning to judgments, in the extract below from one of the filmed vivas, it is apparent that the examiners are negotiating the provisional grade; perhaps more so than in the previous cases. This does not mean that they did not possess an in-the-head normative view about the grade, in this case a C, to guide them. It is more the case that they were articulating and sharing in-the-head views, where a consistent use of theory, drawing on the extrinsic narrative of activity theory had

been supported by Vygotsky and Dewey to analyse the empirical material, deserved in their opinion, a C grade:

**External examiner B:** The grade is between D and C=

**Internal examiner P:** =the written dissertation is worth D

**Supervisor Y:** If it is to be a C it is because of the topic (2.0) it appears that she has written essays (2.0) but she does not do it in an adequate manner. She should have had a writing course (3.0) but there are some situations that show insight into tutoring ((in the companies she has studied))

**B:** If she can make the analysis part better ((in the viva)) and connect it to the empirical data (2.0) sometimes I can't manage to find out what she is working towards have to page backwards and forwards in the dissertation.

**Y:** She makes some strong assertions such as tutoring has been used as concealed critique (...later in the same cluster between examiners))

**Y:** We can use 25 minutes asking about the dissertation and see if she knows the reading list she has chosen for the dissertation. There is a lot of Vygotsky and Dewey here.

**B:** Can we write between C and D as the preliminary grade?=

**Y:** =We must have an unambiguous grade but we can say that it is in the lower level ((of the grade))

**B:** That means we agree on C <sup>135</sup>

The appeal to extrinsic narratives and the existence of in-the-head norms was also found in the under-graduate viva. So too, the manner in which they operated with divisions within the grades, such as a C minus on the way towards a D.

### Refining the validity argument model of the viva as a social practice

In Chapter 4, the argument was made that the goal in examining cases was not statistical generalisation, but an analytical generalisation; such that a model could be developed, used as a template and modified, if necessary, with the introduction of new cases. Three cases have been discussed in this chapter with the goal of

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<sup>135</sup> Graden er mellom D og C

Skriftlig er det D

Supervisor Y Hvis det skulle være en C er det tematikken (2.0) tyder på at det er essayer (2.0) men hun ikke gjør det tilstrekkelig. Hun skulle ha hatt et skrivekurs (3.0) men det er noen situasjoner hun beskriver som viser innsikt i veiledning ((in the companies she has studied))

Om hun kunne gjøre analyse delen bedre og knytte det til empirien (2.0) noen ganger greier jeg ikke å finne ut hva hun jobbe med må blad frem og tilbake i avhandlingen

hun har noen sterke påstand slik som voldning har blitt brukt som skjulte kritikk

Vi bruker 25 minutter om oppgaven og ser om hun kan stå innen pensum hun har valgt for oppgaven...det er mye Vygotsky og Dewey her...

Foretrekker å gi foreløpig C og ser om hun kan stå innen pensum hun har valgt for oppgaven...

Kan vi ha mellom C og D i foreløpig?

Vi må gi entydig karakter men kan si ligge i nedre delen

answering the question: to what extent were the constructs, judgments and other components of the validity argument model different in content and complexity, as the cases progressed from the introductory under-graduate level course, to the post-graduate level?

The diagram below summarises the answer, which as is to be expected, reveals that the post-graduate viva,s compared with the under-graduate viva, introduced a greater complexity and content to the validity argument model. While much of this change is accounted for by the simple move from introductory to advanced to post-graduate, of special interest, is the change in the kind of viva experienced by candidates, and the change in demands placed upon examiners. A comparative perspective was also adopted by Joughin (2007) in his phenomenological investigation of student experiences of oral presentations. He found differences between student experiences within one and the same form of assessment (oral presentations for a theology course). Students moved from a simpler concern with the oral as a transmission of ideas, to a concern with understanding what they were studying, and finally to the more complex experience of the oral in arguing for a position. For Joughin, the explanation for these differences rested with the individuals and their abilities to experience in more complex and diverse ways. In this chapter by contrast, differences in experiences reflect differences in the demands made upon the students and examiners in the move from introductory to advanced programs.

**Diagram: Comparing under-graduate vivas with post-graduate vivas with terms from the validity argument model**

	<b>The travel and tourism viva</b>	<b>The advanced course in education viva</b>	<b>The Master in Education viva</b>
<b>Evidence</b>	Assignment and viva	Assignment and viva	Dissertation, viva and undertook empirical research
<b>Constructs</b>	Inductive	Deductive	Meta-reflection on inductive and deductive
<b>Judgments</b>	Communicative constructs (language game shifts). One extrinsic narrative Grade negotiation in post-viva meeting: from sentence and nod of head to 5 min. per candidate.	Communicative constructs (language game shifts). 5 extrinsic narratives Grade negotiation in pre-viva/post-viva examiner meeting: max. 5-10 min. per candidate	Communicative constructs (language game shifts). 3 extrinsic narratives (including meta-reflection on the discipline) Grade negotiation in pre-viva examiner meeting: between 30-60 min. per candidate. Post-viva examiner meeting: approx 15.min
<b>Construct irrelevance</b>	None	Exists	Potential threat

From the diagram above it can be surmised that a simple conclusion of validity or invalidity for any of the cases is not possible, as with the validity chain of Crooks *et al.* (1996). Instead, the validity arguments differ in not only strength, but complexity and content, such that validation will be more demanding for the post-graduate viva, than for their under-graduate counter-parts. Having said this, the very presence of the supervisor in the viva, and what this might mean in terms of construct irrelevance, might be enough, for many, to assert precisely that the viva is invalid.

Refining the validity argument model for future use requires taking the following points into consideration:

- Allowing for a construct of learning in addition to cognitive and communicative constructs e.g. to conceptualise not only the learning achieved by candidates and communicated by examiners, but also the learning acquired by new examiners as they learn in-the-head norms. This learning construct may not be explicitly stated as a goal, as in some forms of portfolio assessment, where assessment for learning is central (Broadfoot, 2007; Klenowski, 2002; Stobart, 2008).
- The social practice of the viva was most clearly apparent in the inter-subjective manner in which judgments on grades are achieved. And yet, it must be remembered that the other components of the validity argument model also relied upon the exercise of judgment in a collective and inter-subjectively determined context.
- The dominant value sought by the examiners in the viva and in the work of the candidates was an objective, distanced view of science and research. Paradoxically, several of the examiners belonged to the generation who revolted against precisely such a positivistic view of social science, and regularly held lectures on critical theory. It is important to be aware of this, especially as the examiners through their grading (a grade C at master level prohibiting doctoral study) exert an influence on the next generation of potential researchers/lecturers.
- In the previous chapter, the move from denotative *episteme* and evaluative *phronesis* was presented as a possible dilemma for the examiner. In this chapter the case-by-case character of the advanced education viva was conceptualised as an instance of *phronesis* when a subjective quality, such as candidate enthusiasm, was judged pertinent by the examiners. The opportunity and also responsibility to use and allow for such case-by-case elements, such as courage, increased with the move to the post-graduate viva. It might also reflect the increased independence and responsibility allotted to the candidates who in the Case II and III were expected to select the essay topic/research questions for their assignment/dissertations. In Case I, the candidates had been given a choice of questions to answer in their assignments, and their freedom consisted in how they chose to solve the question. Therefore, selecting and formulating the question was not permitted.

While the next last bullet point above suggested that objectivity was the goal, in the bullet point immediately above, it was the opposite, allowing for subjectivity. In the former what was sought was the objectivity of the candidate; something more easily seen and shared across instances. In the latter, it was a subjective quality identified by the examiner, and resting as it did upon the subjective perceptions of the examiners, it was not so easily applied in an equal manner across the three cases. In other words, two different standards or value positions were evoked. Thus, when one of the strengths of the viva is that it allows for what Derrida (quoted by Reinertsen, 2007: 138) in another context called ‘the singularity of the decision to be made’, the reference is to the examiner making allowances for it, and yet at the same time, they want objectivity in the candidate’s submitted work. But, the question that has to be asked is: should the differences in objectivity and subjectivity as value positions be upheld, when on the one hand, the examiner seems to undertake a careful, and at times a fragile balancing act between the two, and on the other hand, the two - objectivity and subjectivity - seem to merge, or run the risk of merging in the eyes of the examiner (and researcher)?

Perhaps the question cannot be answered, and the viva will always possess an objective component that is analytically generalisable across cases and instances, as for example in the appeal to extrinsic narratives, as well as to a subjective component, such as enthusiasm or courage. And precisely because the participants meet face-to-face, as argued in Chapter 3 with reference to Levinas (1969), the ethical obligation to attend to the presence of the other with existential constructs such as enthusiasm, courage and so on will always present itself <sup>136</sup>. The emotional provides insight into the existential state of a person, indicating the manner in which the experience is lived as the Being of being (Heidegger, 1962). This does not mean that the emotional constructs are not present in the judgments found in other forms of assessment, such as examiner comments on written exams. Instead, it means that through the presence of the other (the candidate), the examiners are more likely to be jolted or even cajoled into making them pertinent

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<sup>136</sup> Concepts such as these make it possible to undertake what Eisner (1985: 153) has called ‘educational connoisseurship’ and thereby communicate a qualitative appreciation of the existential.

to their judgments. Simply put, 'lookism'<sup>137</sup>, understood as the manner in which we look and are corporeally received, can exert and influence.

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<sup>137</sup> Davis, 2007: 814.



## Chapter 8

### Theorising the Viva and Closing Comments

Avoid making the candidate feel uncomfortable,  
refrain from trick questions, unanswerable  
questions, or questions that are too personal.

*The State Nobility*, Bourdieu

The stated goal at the outset of this dissertation was to theorise the academic viva and in order to provide a foundation for this three questions were posed: why study the viva, how is the viva ‘talked into being’, and finally, what would a validity argument look like for the viva? In this concluding chapter, I will review my findings upon these three questions, propose a theory of the viva, and to finish, explore the research and policy implications of this dissertation.

## **Research questions**

The goal in this dissertation has been, in the spirit of Nietzsche, to find not the single truth of a phenomenon, in this case the academic viva as a form of assessment; but to look at the conditions under which this kind of viva exists, and hence to reveal its plural truths. Accordingly, the three research questions that have guided the dissertation each approached the academic viva from a particular vantage point, requiring in turn their own conceptual approaches. This does not mean however, that there is no linkage between the three questions or their approaches. For example, language games introduced as part of the answer to the first research question are also relevant, and drawn upon in the answering of research questions 2 and 3. Secondly, the findings from each of the research questions provide a foundation for a theorisation of the viva.

The first research question (Part I) asked simply: why study the viva? A tri-partite answer was offered. Firstly, it is necessary to understand the changing genealogy of the viva from the time of the Greeks to the present day. In order to do this secondary sources were used to argue that different periods were characterised by their own socio-cultural, political and economic conditions and this supported particular kinds of viva. Secondly, the viva has been under-theorised. This argument was supported by a critique of UK research into the doctorate. Thirdly, the viva can and should be understood in terms of its function, existentially and with a special emphasis on the role of the viva as a social practice. This argument was made theoretically, drawing upon the inspiration of Durkheim, Wittgenstein, Goffman, Heidegger and Levinas. Of these, Wittgenstein's concept of the language game has been particularly useful.

The second research question (Part II), motivated by the finding that the viva had been under-theorised, sought to answer in an empirical and theoretical fashion, 'how the viva was talked into being?' Data was collected from cases of the viva in Norway, and the field was narrowed further to the academic viva in higher education. A limited number of Master in Education vivas (based upon 50,000 word dissertations) were filmed. Under-graduate examples of the advanced education vivas were also filmed and a number of vivas in Travel and Tourism were observed (this data was analysed in Part III). The Master in Education vivas

were subjected to conversation analysis and conceptual tools inspired by narratology, language games and co-ordination with tool/body movements were also developed. Some of the key findings were: three main extrinsic narratives were drawn upon by participants (meta-reflection on the discipline, role selection and methodological issues), and in each viva, on the basis of the candidate, examiners and dissertation they were molded to provide unique narrative signatures; a limited number of language games were found in the viva (report, evaluative, interrogative, greeting and parting); conversation analysis identified the crucial role played by moments of silence, and bodily movements were predominantly reserved for the speaker at any particular point in the viva. The socio-political context and economic context was also seen to structure the filmed viva, in the sense that some examiners were conscious of the loss of state income for their college if a candidate had failed. Secondly, some were aware of the Norwegian state's desire to decrease the role played by final, summative assessment, in favour of more formative assessment.

The third research question (Part III) was located in the debate about assessment theory, specifically validity, and this asked the following: what would a validity argument look like for the viva? Following the original insights of Cronbach and Meehl's (1955) and later by Messick (1989), it was contended that the validity of a form of assessment is not a fixed property of the assessment, but the result of a validation process. To conceptualise this process for the viva, a validity argument model with the following components was proposed, comprising evidence, values, constructs and judgments. When applied to cases of the under-graduate viva and the post-graduate viva, in-the-head normative judgments of the examiners were seen to be central, along with the use of extrinsic narratives. Judgments in the viva provided a particularly good example of the inter-subjective character of the viva as a social practice. The kind of constructs found were communicative (switching between language games), cognitive (problem solving, inductive, deductive and in the post-graduate viva, additionally a meta-reflection on the ways of thinking about the knowledge in a discipline) and domain specific. Of interest, was the finding that the threat of construct irrelevance existed in the sense that examiners might take into account a candidate's enthusiasm when grading.

In a hermeneutic reflection upon this dissertation, it is important to highlight certain points of tension that are to some extent unresolved, and remain deeply embedded. For me, this tension is not necessarily about the debate among theorists about an inductive, deductive or abductive approach. In the tradition of Gadamer, it is about certain traditions and prejudices that colour and inform my own approach <sup>138</sup>.

Firstly, I have been somewhat reluctant to talk about power in the viva, and when I have, it has been in terms of what I have called *narrative power*. This reluctance is rooted in a desire to steer clear of a Foucault inspired understanding of power, discourses and practice (for detailed reasons see end of Introduction and Chapter 3). Secondly, assessment practices, as supported by the first quotation in the Preface, are rooted in a modern belief in numbers and counting. In short, it is the modern belief in positivism, that people and their performances can be counted and quantified as specific learning outcomes. I have distanced myself from this perspective by embracing a qualitative approach and by making use of a number of postmodern philosophers, such as Lyotard (Chapter 4 and 5), Nietzsche, (Chapter 1) and the later Wittgenstein (Chapter 3 and 4). However, Chapter 4 and 5 in particular, are premised on the belief that the viva can be watched and reviewed in positivist fashion, revealing some of its processes/dynamics. And, Messick, a source of inspiration in developing my views on assessment validity theory (Chapter 6), was clearly a positivist. Thirdly, I belong to a generation who have been taught by those who were themselves radical young scholars, marked by the political turbulence of the 1970s. This should (or could) have similarly made me a political radical, seeking to use the frameworks supplied by (neo-) Marxists, feminists and anti-racists as points of reference for my own research. True, in the late 1980s when I completed my Magister in Sociology (see Introduction), I was inspired and appropriated Marxist concepts latent in Human Activity Theory. And yet, by the mid-1990s, despite my 10 years as an immigrant (in Norway) and without a full-time job, which should have hardened my radical beliefs, I was more inspired and prone to believe in postmodern, existential interpretations of Nietzsche, Merleau-Ponty, Fanon, Benjamin and Heidegger, along with the work of Kristeva and Irigaray.

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<sup>138</sup> Maguire (2005: 429-430) underlines a similar need for researcher self-reflection, without

The paragraph above, especially its latter part, might be read as a somewhat ego-centric, melancholic confession and justification of the general research approach adopted in this dissertation. But the goal has been to indicate something else, namely the traditions and prejudices that have undoubtedly coloured my (pre-conscious) approach, leading me in a certain direction. These points must be kept in mind in the paragraphs that follow, in particular when I talk of the production of this dissertation as an institutionalised activity.

## **Theorising the viva**

### **a) What are the parameters for the theory?**

At a simple level, theories are constructed from a limited number of interconnected and potentially interacting concepts that provide and account for a phenomenon, in this case the viva. On the one hand, these concepts can be abstracted, as in purification, from the practical activity, making it less complex, and more understandable; they are a shorthand bringing order to what was understood less clearly, or described in a diffuse manner. This is in keeping with Giere's (1999) conception of models, read theories<sup>139</sup>, which can be scaled reconstructions, analogues (read metaphors) or thought constructions seeking to represent the phenomenon. On the other hand, a theory's concepts can be embedded in or drawn from the phenomenon, using terms that participants themselves use, for example, the term viva (in Norwegian *muntlig* or *disputas*). In the first usage, as an abstraction or purification, the concepts are of a second order scientific character, in the latter usage the concepts have more the character of first order, everyday folk concepts used by participants (Schutz, 1962).

The first point to note is that the theory proposed below contains both of these positions, meaning that some of its concepts will make immediate sense to either participants in the viva or a more general public, while other concepts will require that the reader is versed in assessment theory (e.g. validity) and contemporary

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alluding to Gadamer.

<sup>139</sup> Strictly speaking a theory is a set of axioms, while a model is a set of objects satisfying the axioms. But I dissolve the distinction since a theory can have objects and a model axioms.

debates about linguistic theory (e.g. language games), sociology (e.g. social practices) and education.

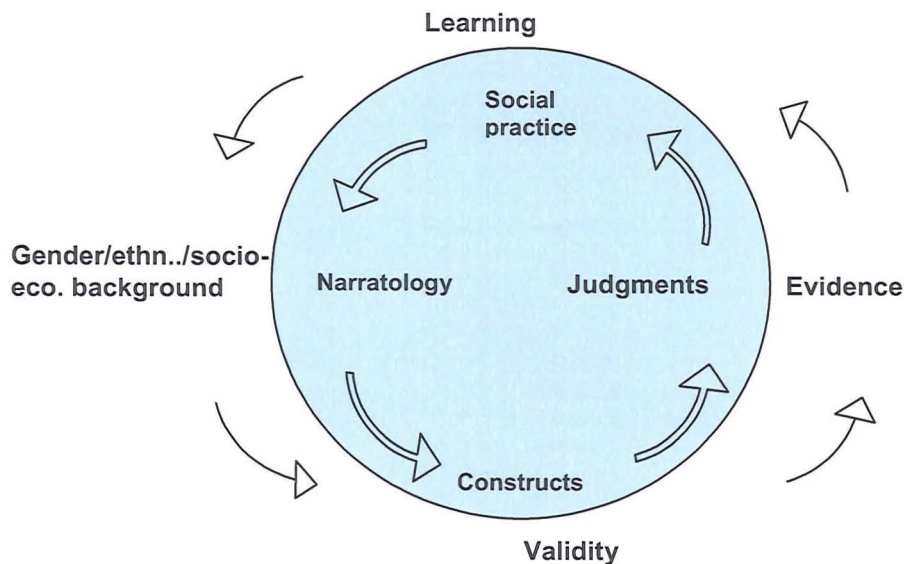
When Goffman (1974) talked of *frame analysis*, Lakatos (1970) of *research programs* and Bourdieu (1996) of *fields*, they sought to understand the social production and reproduction of different institutionalised activities and forms of knowledge accompanying them. The theory of the viva proposed in the pages that follow has similarly emerged as part of an institutionalised activity based upon the writer's (Dobson) journey through the Institute of Education's doctoral research programme (with compulsory and selected courses, assignments, an up-grade and tutorials) and more specifically, how the theory's goal can be understood as a proposal for a research programme on the social practice of the viva. Other proposals and research programs are possible, for example Jackson and Tinkler (2001) were concerned with doctoral policy at different universities and different institutional policy documents. The following research programme is delimited to a qualitative understanding of the viva, seeking to elicit 'a sense of what is going on' (Goffman, 1974:10). As the second research question put it, the goal was to understand how the viva was 'talked into being'.

A research programme, as defined by Lakatos, entails a hard core of assertions (his term was hypotheses), a protective belt of auxiliary, less strong assertions, a positive heuristic (suggesting paths of research to pursue) and negative heuristic (telling us what paths of research to avoid). Lakatos restricts negative heuristic to the core assertion, which is not to be problematised, and positive heuristic to the questioning of the auxiliary assertions. If the core concepts collapse, the theory will fall, and also the research programme. However, if the auxiliary concepts fail to work, the core, along with the theory and research programme it supports, will still remain intact. Reworking Lakatos's conceptual apparatus, what is at issue in this theory of the viva, is the identification of one or more concepts, including assertions, which are positioned in the core of the theory, and surrounding them, a set of concepts, including assertions, that constitute a protective, auxiliary belt. The second modification made of Lakatos's conceptual apparatus is to propose that the core concepts can also be researched in a positive heuristic manner with the goal of questioning their core position. In addition, auxiliary concepts can be examined from the viewpoint of a negative heuristic in order to protect them;

asking what is necessary for concepts to hold, rather than be questioned and modified or abandoned?

The diagram below visualises core concepts occupying a more central role, with auxiliary concepts rotating around the core. Together they constitute my theory of the academic viva. In what follows I shall reflect upon the individual concepts of the core and protective belt. Thereafter, I shall explore how the concepts ‘hang together’.

**Diagram: Theorising the academic viva**



**b) Core concepts**

The following four core concepts social practice, narratology, judgments and constructs are inter-related in the sense that one concept might be expressed through one of the other core concepts e.g. the concept of social practice draws upon the conception of narratives, which provide a certain stability to the social practice. This is not to mean that the core concepts lack a certain degree of autonomy, it is instead to indicate that they inter-penetrate and influence each other. In other words, there are lines of inter-connection.

In this theory there are certain concepts that are hard to position and are therefore not considered explicitly, such as the concept of institutional framework. On the one hand, it is always present and permeates all other concepts, suggesting that it cannot be neglected and is a core concept. On the other hand, precisely because it

is so variable and a catch-all, it becomes difficult to give it a content and specify its inclusion as a core concept. Is it therefore, to do with rules and regulations e.g. determining the presence/non-presence and role of the supervisor? Or is it to do with the college's dependence on passing candidates in order to secure a sum of money from the state for each successful candidate? I would contend it is to do with these things, but also with many other things, such as the history of the viva in a particular institution, the role of groups of examiners as a group sharing their beliefs on the viva (tacitly shared norms) and so on.

### **Social practice**

One of the core concepts in the theory is social practice, such that the viva is understood to be constructed by participants who meet together with the goal of arriving at a final grade. Participants are allocated roles, and cannot behave as they wish, and as such the social practice entails normative implications. But the norms are not given in a 'once and for all' manner, they have to be enacted and performed (Goffman, 1969) and the emergence of new ones remains an ever-present possibility<sup>140</sup>. Ball (2004) and ethnomethodologists such as Garfinkel (1986) have theorised and talked of the 'fabrication of performativity' in different ways, and Dobson (2006) has identified 'display value', but they share with my theory the premise that interaction is constructivist and as a consequence social forms are emergent and visible in social practices. Following this line of argument, the viva might be regarded as a form of performance assessment, to be contrasted with more standardised forms of assessment, such as multiple choice. Performance assessments have in the words of Eisner (1999: 659) 'an open-ended quality and thus make possible the expression of individuality'. This form of argument is of course to be expected from Eisner, known for his support of expression and expressive learning goals. Nevertheless, his views are pertinent when the viva is regarded as a meaning making, creative social practice.

The social practice of the viva as a performance can be further theorised by regarding the participants as rational and calculating. Put differently and in

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<sup>140</sup> Social practice theory is sometimes conceived in terms of Human Activity Theory if the performance perspective is not adopted. Human Activity Theory can be quite systematic and goal-



accordance with rational choice theory (Otnes, 2004), participants will consider that each statement possesses a strategic and consequential importance, when heard by other participants. Candidates filmed and interviewed thought in this manner before and during the viva. However, and by way of contrast and as a criticism of rational choice theory, some examiners openly stated in interview and during the viva, that their intention was more in keeping with Habermas's (1989) conception of a domination free conversation. This had the goal of encouraging viva participants to mobilise critical rationality and let the strength of rational argument dictate the flow of statements and concepts raised and elaborated in a non-disciplinary, interest-free fashion. .

Returning to norms, they are not merely allocated through roles, such as the internal and external examiner and the candidate. They are also evident in and through language games used by participants. Language games can be regarded as the source of social bonds between participants, hence their relevance in understanding the practice of the viva as a social event. In the empirical research undertaken, only a limited number of language games were evident from the multitude suggested by Wittgenstein (1994): report, interrogative, evaluative, greeting and parting. It is always possible that in new instances of the viva, different language games may emerge and with them new norms, for example, imagine if joking language games or insulting language were permitted.

### **Narratology**

The social practice of the viva draws upon the concept of narratives in two senses. Firstly, intrinsic narratives account for the manner in which the examiners regard the viva as having a beginning (pre-viva examiner meeting), middle (viva) and end (post-viva examiner meeting). This pattern is normative in the sense that there is a progression through stages and in that order, with a plot tying the phases together in the movement towards a final grade. And yet, the progression can be disrupted or slowed down, if the examiners keep looking backwards to a point made in the pre-viva examiner meeting. The narrative can therefore become multi-directional (Dobson, 2005) and also multi-accented, as different participants

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oriented in its understanding, ignoring or under-emphasising in the process the role of existential components (Dobson and Haaland, 1993). This is one of the main reasons for my not adopting it.

make their contribution. Moreover, the candidate's experience of the viva as an intrinsic narrative can be understood using language games: the viva opens with the greeting language game and account of the dissertation (report language game), moving to the middle of the viva (interrogative language game) and closing with the summing up (report-like language game) and the parting language game after the final grade has been received.

The other kinds of narrative found in the viva are extrinsic, and by this it is meant that examiners and candidates make an appeal to narratives lying outside the viva. These kinds of narratives aren't therefore to do with making connections between different parts of the viva. An example of an extrinsic narrative is the one on professional practice, rooted in the work and findings of well-known and recognised researchers on the topic. In the filmed viva, only a limited number of extrinsic narratives were identified: meta-reflection on the discipline, role clarification and methodological issues. In each instance of the viva one of the extrinsic narratives was revealed as the master and most dominant narrative. The content of each viva, in terms of its specific topic, along with the interests/background competencies of the examiners, will exert an influence on the extrinsic narratives, creating the unique signature of the viva in the process.

Theorising further the concept of narratology in the social practice of the viva, it can be noted that the intrinsic and extrinsic narratives provide the participants with the assuredness that the viva is predictable. Phrased differently, narratives help participants construct and negotiate the event, and in the tradition of Socrates (e.g. in the *Meno* dialogue) it might be understood that in the viva the student and examiners, through narratives, remember Ideas already known, but momentarily forgotten.

I have also argued that power rests with narratives voiced by the participants, in the sense that there is a struggle to voice dominant narratives accounting for and legitimating the knowledge of the particular dissertations. Narrative power is also the power to voice the narratives and this is not always simply a reflection of a pre-assigned institutional role, such as examiner. There are occasions, when a candidate during a viva, can voice a narrative that upsets this role allocation, demanding and gaining, if only for a moment, acceptance for their narrative as

opposed to the one voiced by the examiner. In other words, the narrative determining the role and certain privileges connected with a role, rather than the opposite.

### **Judgments**

The third core concept in the social practice of the viva is devoted to examiner judgments. In the viva, perhaps more so than in other forms of assessment, the final grades were reached on the basis of inter-subjective, face-to-face discussions between examiners. The judgments rested upon tacit norms, what can be called in-the-head normative views e.g. colleagues who shared the view that a ‘fiery, lightning sharp understanding’ (*brennende forståelse*) was required for grade A. Moreover, the examiners made their judgments legitimate by considering if, and to what extent the candidate had made reference to specific extrinsic narratives e.g. if the extrinsic narrative on methodological issues had had an adequate discussion of reliability, validity and generalisation. Central to the conception of examiner judgments in the viva, is the view that examiners negotiated the grade, and this provided the opportunity – not always taken – to make the tacit in the head norms explicit and open to debate. The negotiation might also be understood as a hermeneutic spiral (Conroy, 2003; Moss, 1992, 1994, Moss *et al.*, 2006) as participants work onwards towards new levels of shared understanding. Shared understanding does not have to mean that all agree on the final grade. It can mean shared understanding of differences, where two examiners out-vote a third. However, examiners agreeing on the same grade can remain an ideal, even if it is not realised in all cases.

In Chapter 4, I cited Lyotard’s concept of the *differend* (différend), ‘a case of conflict, between (at least) two parties, that cannot be equitably resolved for lack of a rule of judgment applicable to both arguments’ (Lyotard, 1988: xi). I was interested in suggesting that conversation/dialogue in the viva might break down if participants failed to agree that they were playing or following the same language game. But, when the examiners disagree on a final grade this is not a case of the *differend*, as long as they can agree that they are following the evaluative language game.

Examiners move between different language games and this was evident in how they used the denotative language game to gather insight that might be used in the evaluative language. But, the important point in my opinion, is that the evaluative cannot be reduced to the denotative language game. The evaluative, recalling Aristotle's (1981) point makes use of case-by-case components such as candidate enthusiasm. Such components suggest parallels to Sadler's (1989, 2008) concept of configurational judgments, that are wider and more holistic than analytical examiner judgments, which are solely based upon the existence or non-existence of denotative statements tied to explicitly stated criteria (e.g. on grading sheets).

The tacitly shared normative foundation for judgments can be further theorised by connecting it to debates on guild knowledge and the idea that communities of knowledge exist, into which entrance is guarded/permitted by gatekeepers and 'connoisseurship...can be communicated only by example, not by precept' (Polyani, cited by Sadler, 1989: 135). This was one of the main theoretical premises behind Delamont et. al's (2000) research on how doctoral students gained entry into the guild of doctoral graduates. The idea of a guild and its gatekeepers carries the implication that the norms have to be learnt (and upheld), or admission will be refused (and membership rescinded); and secondly, that admission requires self-discipline and conformity as opposed to rebellion. Durkheim (1984) believed that the guild and its modern equivalent, the professional association, secured the societal integration of members. The viva parallels this understanding through its similar integrative function, allowing successful candidates entry into the (social) scientific profession, understood broadly as the community of (social) scientists. It might be contended that this argument does not hold for the Master in Education viva, and that only the doctoral viva qualifies for tenure or the right to work as a professional researcher. However, in the Norwegian context, while the Master in Education does not qualify for tenure in lectureship posts (as it once did in the 1970s and well into the 1980s), it may qualify for employment as a professional researcher in a research institute.

## Constructs

The last core concept refers to constructs. Simply put, these are what the examiners, or developers of an assessment form, are looking for. Constructs as a domain or subject-based concept are easy to understand if you consider students studying Travel and Tourism, where domain specific knowledge includes knowledge of geography, the history of travel and tourism, and understanding budgeting and planning. This is in the tradition of the ‘know-that’ perspective.

In all instances of the viva studied in this dissertation, examiners were looking for multiple constructs, including domain or subject-based knowledge (e.g. knowledge of the topics/narratives under discussion in the viva), emotional constructs, communicative ability as a construct and cognitive constructs. Emotional constructs were not always present in the deliberations of examiners, but on occasions the courage or enthusiasm of the candidate was praised. In chapter 7 it was suggested that this might be understood as evidence of construct irrelevance, in the sense that it directs attention away from other constructs, such as the cognitive. On the other hand, they can also be understood as pertinent and indicators of the existential manner in which candidates live their experiences (Heidegger, 1962). It is also worth noting that evidence of courage and enthusiasm balance and resist the focus usually placed upon the viva as a source of anxiety and fear (Joughín, 2007; Murray, 2003) <sup>141</sup>.

Communicative ability as a construct covers the manner in which candidates are expected to recognise language games, move between different language games and take turns. The taking of turns was revealed with the tool of conversation analysis. Rarely was the construct of communicative ability raised for discussion by examiners. On one occasion it was revealed in an examiner’s desire to ask ‘why’ (evaluative language game) as opposed to merely descriptive ‘how’ (denotative) questions to the candidates.

The cognitive or psychological construct took differing forms dependent on the level of the viva e.g. in under-graduate vivas, examiners were looking for

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<sup>141</sup> Sadler (2008a) also opens for the necessity of creating an assessment environment that permits the emergence of such intuitive components not easily expressed in a verbal manner.

evidence of inductive reasoning (introductory courses) or deductive reasoning (more advanced courses). In post-graduate vivas evidence of both of these forms of reasoning were desired, and additionally a meta-reflection on precisely these kinds of reasoning and the discipline as a whole. All the vivas showed evidence of another dimension of cognitive reasoning, namely problem solving, as candidates (re-)solved problems raised by examiners in their critical examination of submitted work.

As one examiner put it in an interview, ‘the viva makes it possible to gain insight into what the student is capable of and how they argue through concepts.’<sup>142</sup> Put differently, the examiners sought rationality in action. This might be in accordance with the Vygotskian premise, that inner speech can be made external and audible. However, it is questionable if outer verbalised thought exactly mirrors the inner speech. As Vygotsky (1986) himself pointed out, predicates can be lacking in inner speech because it does not have to show self-other direction. Vygotsky’s point was that even though thought moves and manifests itself through language, it can be difficult, if not impossible to gain direct access to pure thought processes (Dobson and Haaland, 1993). The examiner’s point above can therefore, be modified to mean a reflection of thought through *voiced* and *audible* concepts, but never a perfect reflection.

In talking of rationality in action as a measure of candidate achievement, a parallel can be drawn to the debate on learning outcomes in Higher Education in Europe and how ‘knowledge and skills should be demonstrated in situations relevant for verification’<sup>143</sup>. A second parallel can be found in a Bloom inspired taxonomy of learning in terms of knowledge (cognitive) goals, where it has been asserted that the key is to explore whether the candidates have developed an ability to analyse, synthesise (termed create in the revised version) and evaluate beyond a more elementary level of knowledge (termed remember in the revised version) understanding and application<sup>144</sup>. It might be argued that such an ability to

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<sup>142</sup> Med muntlig få vi innsikt i hva student kan og hvordan de resonner om begreper

<sup>143</sup> See page 18

[www.regjering.no/upload/KD/Hoeringssdok/2007/200703620/raqppport\\_forslag\\_til\\_nasjonalt\\_rammeverk\\_for\\_kvalifikasjoner\\_i\\_ho](http://www.regjering.no/upload/KD/Hoeringssdok/2007/200703620/raqppport_forslag_til_nasjonalt_rammeverk_for_kvalifikasjoner_i_ho)

<sup>144</sup> <http://www.nwlink.com/~donclark/hrd/bloom.html>. See also: Kratwohl (2002) and Pintrich (2002) for what I call a revised Bloom taxonomy.

analyse, synthesise and evaluate can also be found in the different types of reasoning outlined above (inductive, deductive and meta-reflection). Without reaching any firm conclusion on the exact connection between a Bloom inspired line of argument and my own, it can however, be stated that one of the things I have sought to do in this dissertation, is to show how rationality in action becomes manifest to examiners, in and through the practice of the viva.

### **c) Protective, auxiliary concepts**

These concepts are more varying in influence than the core concepts and provide support to the core concepts.

#### **Ethnicity, gender and socio-economic background**

In retrospect, a greater focus might have been placed upon the role of gender, ethnicity and socio-economic background of participants in the viva, and how it might have exerted an influence e.g. with respect to differentiation, exclusion, alienation and what I like to call inclusive exclusion (Dobson, 2004).

Differentiation by ethnicity was identified as crucial in the research into medical viva carried out by Roberts *et al.* (2000). However, the approach pursued in this research was that gender, ethnicity and socio-economic were only considered when raised as an issue by the participants: gender was not considered pertinent by the examiners, and when ethnicity was raised by either examiner or participant, it did not have an effect upon examiner constructs. In other words, gender and ethnicity are auxiliary concepts that might still be pertinent in other instances of the viva.

The same applies to the socio-cultural, socio-political, socio-economic and common sense reasoning as structuring factors. In retrospect, a greater focus might also have been placed upon these factors, but a pragmatic approach was chosen: considered only when made relevant by participants. The socio-cultural was evident as the socialisation of the new examiners by the more experienced examiners into the norms and social practice of the particular institution (see later in this chapter for further discussion). The economic and political was evident in the examiner's concern that failing a candidate would result in no funding from the state for the particular candidate. Evidence of domination free common sense

reasoning was found on some occasions, and also the opposite: the use of reasoning for more disciplinary purposes.

### **Validity**

Validity, or more correctly the social practice of validation, is not something that has to be undertaken. It can be omitted and isn't therefore essential to all instances of the viva. When it is present, it is worth noting that validation is not something reserved for those who devise a viva examination. It is something that examiners in particular instances of the viva can undertake. It requires a reflection and theorisation of examiner constructs, values, an awareness of social consequences and the kind of evidence (e.g. candidate performance in the viva) used by examiners. It also requires a reflection on examiner judgments (a core concept) and the degree to which these judgments draw upon the components mentioned above (constructs, values and so on), in-the-head norms and extrinsic narratives.

Of especial interest is the manner in which construct irrelevance or under-representation is present. In the data explored in the previous chapter, the presence of the supervisor during the pre-viva examiner meeting, viva and post-viva examiner meeting meant that more subjective and emotionally dependent constructs might be drawn upon to support judgments (e.g. accounts of enthusiasm or courage). Not all cases of the viva in Norway allow for the presence of the supervisor. However, the main point is that the face-to-face presence of the candidate provides the opportunity, not necessarily taken it must be added, of emotional constructs being taken into consideration by examiners in their deliberations and negotiations with each other. Candidate courage and enthusiasm are two examples that suggest that an understanding of examiner constructs should be widened to include emotional constructs. But, as suggested above, it might also be interpreted as a source of construct irrelevance from the perspective of other constructs, such as the cognitive.

### **Evidence**

Evidence used by the examiners in the viva studied in this dissertation, was a written text in the form of an assignment or dissertation (based upon empirical



research in some, but not all instances), along with a performance in the viva. These different components constituted a functional whole in the Durkheimian (1984) sense; one part a text, the other a verbal event, with a relationship of dependency between the two.

In theorising this whole the balance between the text and the viva become important. For example, in research on the doctoral viva in the UK Jackson and Tinkler (2001) found that the point in decision-making was not the actual viva for some of their informants; suggesting in turn an outer point in the balance between viva and text, where the former played less of a decisive role. The same is also the case in the Norwegian doctorate, which has to be approved prior to the *disputas*. At the other extreme, is the view voiced in a focus group with candidates after their under-graduate vivas. They hadn't received any questions on their submitted work, and instead questions were from the course's reading list. With such a varying balance and significance between the elements in the functional whole, I have placed evidence as an auxiliary concept in the theory, rather than as a core and essential concept.

## **Learning**

Learning, similar to evidence, is an auxiliary concept because its presence and influence upon the viva varies. In other forms of assessment, such as the portfolio, the argument has been made (Klenowski, 2002) that a concept of learning (assessment for learning) is essential to understanding the role played by feedback, as work is gradually completed and added to the portfolio. Feedback is understood to exert a formative influence on the student's learning and hence upon their final level of achievement (Black and Wiliam, 1998; Broadfoot, 2007; Pryor and Crossouard, 2008; Stobart, 2008). This is not immediately evident with the viva, especially when it comes at the end of a course of study (as opposed to early in a BA) or the examiners show little inclination to consider the social consequences of their grading. Nevertheless, examiners were on occasions concerned with communicating learning in the form of telling the candidate what they must learn in preparation for subsequent vivas.

A second component of learning, was also evident in the awareness of new examiners that they would not receive explicit and organised instruction into what was expected of them. They were to learn and acquire tacit knowledge on the basis of examining with more experienced examiners. Such a perspective resonates with Dreyfus and Dreyfus's <sup>145</sup> work on the move from novice to expert, or what might be simply termed the move from *know-that* articulated knowledge to *know-how* intuitive and largely unarticulated knowledge. As many new examiners have themselves experienced vivas as candidates, they possess a certain ballast of experience to draw upon. This may not however, outweigh the dependency of new examiners upon experienced examiners. In other words, sitting on one side of the table, as candidate, is not the same as sitting on the other side of the table, as examiner. As one informant put it, 'it is hard to be the executioner' and communicate bad news to a candidate.

It must not be forgotten that the culture of assessment in examining institutions, in terms of shared norms and traditions, will exert an influence (Engh, Dobson and Høihilder, 2007). But this influence may not be distributed equally, with experienced examiners rather than new examiners more inclined to defend the norms (which may not be explicitly articulated) against directives issued by the college/university leadership <sup>146</sup>. An argument along these lines, not pursued in this dissertation, would follow the lead of Bourdieu and additionally look closely at the exchange of services between academics, as a source of academic capital and symbolic power. Specifically, in asking to examine or supervise, not only is it the case that obligations breed obligations, but something else becomes evident:

[...] the ritual of the viva...consists in the submissive waiting and in the recognition of the academic order which it implies (Bourdieu, 1996a: 95).

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<sup>145</sup> [http://socrates.berkeley.edu/~hdreyfus/html/paper\\_socrates.html](http://socrates.berkeley.edu/~hdreyfus/html/paper_socrates.html)

<sup>146</sup> Dobson (2004: 70-71): [...] it is not always the case that everything is consciously or immediately expressed in signs. As Williams put it, 'a culture, while it is being lived, is always in part unknown, in part unrealised.' What he is alluding to is the tacit, taken for granted foreground of norms, values and cultural resources.

This is a functional argument (see Chapter 3), enabling Bourdieu to understand the *habitus*<sup>147</sup> of the examiner and the role they play in integrating the candidate into the academic institution. It requires a certain ascetic form of deliberation and patience, which assists in the consecration of the way of Being of the academic.

With the presentation of the elements in the core and protective belt complete, the question remaining is ‘how do the concepts hang together?’

The diagram introduced earlier in this chapter depicts an inner circle and an outer belt. In both circle and belt, I have added arrows in a circulating fashion. This might be taken to indicate that social practice in the core leads to narratives, which then lead on to constructs and judgments, and then back to social practice.

However, the aim is less of a ring of chained links, one leading on to the next in an irreversible fashion. Instead, the arrows are meant to indicate a continual circulation where one core concept might be expressed through another, and so on. For example, the social practice concept expressed through narratives and constructs or judgments, such that they function to stabilise the viva as a social practice. Another example is the concept of judgments, where examiners draw upon extrinsic narratives to reach their judgment. This suggests lines of dependency between the different core concepts. However, it is not the point that one core concept causes another, but it is more the case of one concept drawing upon and expressed through another. Put differently, the inter-relation between the core concepts is a dependency understood in expressive, rather than causal terms<sup>148</sup>. The revelation of causal relations would have required more of a statistical approach using the tool of regression and probability analysis.

The same expressive line of argument applies to the auxiliary concepts. They were expressed in the viva studied through the core concepts. But, the reason for their auxiliary status was that if they were not present the viva continued. The

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<sup>147</sup> As a disposition towards academic culture (Bourdieu, 1996a: 99)

<sup>148</sup> The expressive as opposed to causal relation has its own genealogy. To take two exponents: Benjamin (2003: 99-115) in his famous exchange with Adorno, refused to identify causality in connection with commodities, and saw instead the expressive manifestation of capitalist phenomena in different forms. Nietzsche (1973, aphorism 14) noted that while we can be sure of effects which are open to endless interpretations, it is far from clear what is to be pinned down in each instance as the single or multiple causal explanation of a phenomenon. My earlier reference to multi-directionality in narratives also questions the linear view of cause and effect (see Chapter 4 and Dobson, 2005).

reader might accept that gender, ethnicity and socio-background may not always exert an influence upon the viva, and similarly that learning and validity might not always be in focus. But shouldn't evidence be positioned as a core concept and not as an auxiliary concept? Surely, there can be no viva without evidence? However, I positioned evidence as an auxiliary concept because of the varying significance that may be placed upon the submitted work in different forms of viva. In some cases, the impression might be that the viva itself had no role to play; and the examiners were not willing to let it influence the final grade, already agreed in the pre-viva meeting. In the Norwegian doctoral *disputas*, the viva has more of a ceremonial function and this might also be the interpretation with respect to the under-graduate viva studied in this dissertation because the final grades were reached so quickly in the grading discussions. This contrasts with the filmed Master in Education, where the viva played a central role in the final grade. So, while I agree that evidence of some kind is central to the viva, it is by no means certain or fixed as to what it might be: it might be the dissertation minus the viva or it might be the viva ignoring to a large degree the submitted work and focusing on something else, such as the reading list. This uncertainty and variance is the reason for the auxiliary status.

It is clear that the core concept of social practice occupies a special position in this dissertation and also in this theory, because of the emphasis on the social character in which the viva is constituted. It is talked collectively into being. As a consequence the core-auxiliary theory could have been refined to make social practice the bull's eye at the centre. I have chosen not to do this because of the manner in which the core concepts are expressed in and through each other.

A research with a background in psychology might have bracketed out the social in order to strengthen the focus upon cognitive thought processes, taking place in individual participants. This would have resulted in a different research program on the viva and resulted in a different set of core and auxiliary concepts. In other words, the components of the theory and their ordering in core and auxiliary would have been different.

#### **d) Contextualising the theory of the viva**

The theory proposed above is qualitative in the sense that it focuses upon the micro-interaction of participants in the viva as it takes place. This parallels the qualitative approach of Trafford and Leshem (2000, 2002a) on the viva, already discussed in some detail in Chapter 2, who developed their own theory on what was taking place in the viva. I have found few examples of researchers who have theorised the viva, with the result that the viva has suffered from under-theorisation.

Trafford and Leshem (2002) theorised the viva in terms of the synergy produced between social dynamics (capacity to build adult-adult relationships, knowing one's strengths), emotional and scholarly resilience (willingness to deflect questions) and the construct of doctorateness (indicating sufficient complexity, transparency, originality). Synergy is, in my opinion, too diffuse as a theoretical concept, in the sense that it is difficult to determine the lines of interaction and dependency between the three elements in their theory. Secondly, it contains, at least in Trafford's understanding of the term (personal communication 5.3.04), the assumption that system equilibrium is the goal of the viva. This is not always the case for the viva, with candidates (and supervisors) at times encouraging and defending a disequilibrium between their views and those of the examiners. The potential for new narrative moves by participants means that innovation and resultant changes can upset any state of equilibrium.

Trafford and Leshem's concept of doctorateness is a construct like my concept of the construct, in its domain and subject specific form, specifying sought after qualities. However, there are some obvious differences. Firstly, they have limited their construct of doctorateness to a domain/subject-based understanding. My research has looked at different kinds of constructs (domain/subject specific, communicative, emotional and psychological/cognitive) in under-graduate and post-graduate vivas, identifying varying examiner demands, with respect to complexity in candidate argument for example. Secondly, where they have defined their construct to connect closely to stated criteria in exam regulations, I have not at the outset done this. Admittedly, *independence* was identified by examiners in my research, and this was also embedded in grading sheets for a

descriptor of higher grades <sup>149</sup>. Independence is close to, but not identical, with the demand for originality in doctoral regulations. However, besides independence, other constructs sought by examiners in the cases studied were not easily identified or embedded in the grading sheets. A third difference is notable: the level of detail, for example, in terms of constructs of cognitive (inductive, deductive and so on) and communicative ability and what they entailed, was lacking in their work e.g. they talked of synthesizing concepts/establishing conceptual links as a component of doctorateness (2002: 34), and not types of thought; and they noted only questions asked, but not the answers. To summarise these points on constructs, in tying their definition of the construct too closely to the one identified in exam regulations, they risked limiting and becoming blind to the existence of other constructs.

The strength of their theory rests on the emphasis given to social interaction between the participants. What they have termed social dynamics, overlaps with my concept of social practice and the use of conversation analysis to understand the statements and roles of participants. In comparing my theory to their theory, the similarities are strong and the differences reflect in part, the different concepts (e.g. synergy) proposed to analyse what is going on.

It is important to attend to the question of generalisation to other instances and forms of viva. The argument on generalisation made in this essay has been as follows: firstly, that statistical generalisation has not been the goal, instead analytical generalisation in terms of different instances have been analysed, and are analysable by the same concepts. Moving from under-graduate to post-graduate viva and back again and using the same set of concepts provided an example of this. Moreover, the overlap between the concepts in my theory and the theory proposed by Trafford and Leshem, suggests a level of analytical generalisation between theories.

Could my theory be used to generalise and account for academic doctoral vivas? UK academic doctoral vivas, as analysed by Trafford and Leshem, show many parallels to the concepts and interactions identified in my theory. This suggests

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<sup>149</sup> Grading sheet and descriptors are reproduced in the Appendix in Norwegian and English.

that a certain analytical generalisation might be possible. Can concepts proposed in my theory be used to generalise and account for the Norwegian doctoral *disputas* (disputation), especially when, as already noted earlier, this is taken after the dissertation has been approved for public defence, and less is at stake? On one count, even though the *disputas* is a low stake phenomenon, this is precisely one of its strengths. Accordingly, without the concern for pass or fail, it becomes an arena and opportunity for pursuing the domination free conversation, as aspired to in one of the filmed vivas. Another potential analytical generalisation can be identified between the filmed vivas and the Norwegian *disputas*: the *disputas* opens with a report language game as the first opponent or the candidate offers a presentation of the main the elements of the dissertation. Following the report language game there are clusters of questions and answers, between the candidate and the two appointed opponents, and these demonstrate the existence of the interrogative language game. The public can also ask questions, although rarely do<sup>150</sup>. Greeting and parting language games are present as well, orchestrated by the chair of proceedings, usually the Dean of the Faculty or an appointee. The evaluative language game also exists, but this is not something viewed by the public or candidate at the *disputas*. The examiners retire after the disputation and send their verdict to the faculty who notify the candidate in due course<sup>151</sup>. In the *disputas* the role of external examiner is played by the first and second opponent.

Could my theory be used to generalise and account for professional viva? It is hard to answer this without empirical evidence, but it might be contended that examiners will still seek evidence of constructs in the viva, but the mixes of communicative, cognitive and other constructs will vary in different forms of viva. In performance viva in the arts, a dancer's dance or an architect's drawing provide the subject for the viva, while the viva itself explores not only cognitive constructs connected with argumentation (inductive and deductive) but verbal, visual and spatial constructs (of colour, shape, size, structure, movement/weight

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<sup>150</sup> In more detail: the first opponent asks questions and when satisfied there is an intermission. When the disputation resumes, the second opponent begins questioning. Members of the public have to notify the chair in the intermission if they wish to ask a question.

<sup>151</sup> The verdict is very much a foregone conclusion. I cannot recall having head of a person failing their disputation. Nevertheless, the disputation does provide the opportunity for the opponents to ask heard and difficult questions in public, where those present are witnesses. This event, thus approaches what Habermas would call, evoking critical rationality, an instance of a domination-free public sphere.

and so on) supporting and conceptualising these performances. In the professional viva, such as in medicine, the candidate doctor must in addition to communicative and cognitive constructs (inductive and deductive), demonstrate constructs connected with ethical choices, duties and an ethics of care and concern.

### **Future research and policy implications**

In this dissertation the vivas studied were delimited to the Norwegian context, with the exception of a review of research on doctoral research in the UK in Chapter 2. A further delimitation was made to focus on under-graduate cases in education and travel and tourism and post-graduate Master in Education cases. Other academic vivas and other kinds of vivas might have been researched in order to challenge and develop the theory proposed above.

A line of research not pursued in this dissertation has been an exploration of examiner judgments using the tool of Judgment Analysis. This would have included ‘thought-aloud recording’ and the search for in-context cues, such as subjective knowledge of specific candidates, and out-of-context cues, such as stated criteria and standards on grading sheets. This was the approach adopted by Cooksey *et al.* (2007) in their psycho-metric study of how a sample of 20 teachers evaluated students’ writing. The advantage of such research would be that it provides statistical data of potential correlations between in-context and out of context factors. The disadvantage is that an emphasis on interpreting the data quantitatively lacks the sensitivity and depth of a more qualitative approach. The latter might reveal the dynamics of judgmental thinking. This was actually a goal for Cooksey *et al.* who noted a ‘clear indication of idiosyncratic and localised “site” validity processes in operation’. Secondly, the think-aloud approach rests upon the assumption, as they themselves note, that judgment processes can be adequately verbalised and do not remain largely intuitive or a property of embodied expression (e.g. nods, sighs and so on). Adequate verbalisation may not always be achieved. It might also be argued that filming the different phases of the viva is already a kind of ‘thought aloud recording’ providing access to rationality and judgments in action.



An alternative line of future exploration are judgment thresholds and the relevance of this concept to theorising the viva. Judgment thresholds, a concept proposed by Royce Sadler in conversation (21.3.07) and inspired by Tversky and Kahneman (1974)<sup>152</sup>, understands how judgments are based upon a critical factor or an accumulation of factors to a saturation point, that when reached, results in a judgment.<sup>153</sup> Klenowski (2007:10) in similar vein has talked of identifying the non-discountable pole in examiner judgments. The non-discountable functions as a critical threshold dictating the weighting of the judgment. In the vivas explored in this dissertation I have talked of the master extrinsic narrative in each viva. This can be compared with the conception of judgment thresholds, as it too marks a critical factor in the viva. Yet, the master narrative concept fails to understand, as Sadler's concept does, how different narratives may accumulate and finally saturate the opinions of examiners, such that they can reach a shared judgment on the candidate. More research needs to be done on the concept of the judgment threshold, in order to explore how individual examiners in examiner meetings are willing to change, in the face of resistance from other examiners, from what appeared at the outset, to be a strongly held judgment. A possible research question is in this respect: how are first impressions<sup>154</sup> transformed into the final grade, with intervening provisional grades, 'cat and mouse' hesitations and negotiations playing a central role?

The socialisation of new examiners by older, more experienced examiners could be researched in more detail and it would be interesting to see if programs of instruction for new examiners, seeking to make explicit tacit examiner knowledge among other things, could be developed (Klenowski and Wyatt-Smith, 2007). At present they do not exist in the Norwegian context. One learning approach could

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<sup>152</sup> Tversky and Kahneman (1974: 1124) reflect upon judgments and how 'people rely upon a limited number of heuristic principles which reduce the complex tasks of assessing probabilities and predicting values to simpler judgmental operations'. The principles are: representativeness, availability, adjustment and anchoring.

<sup>153</sup> The sociologist Bertaux (1981: 37-38) reflected upon the concept of saturation: "A process of saturation of knowledge... We may say that our sample is representative, not at the morphological level (at the level of superficial description), but at the sociological level, at the level of sociostructural relations (*rapports sociaux*).” The former is more quantitative e. g. number who are voting for a particular party. The latter is concerned with how voters go about making and determining their choice. In the context of the viva, saturation indicates something of the qualitative character of the 'how' judgments are reached, rather than answering the question 'how many?'

<sup>154</sup> Yaphe and Street (2003: 767) focus upon the role of 'first impressions'. In their model they proposed stem questions followed by exploratory and confirming questions.

be to arrange sessions when new examiners and experienced examiners looked at past examples of dissertations, developing a shared understanding about how to grade them and what questions might be asked in a viva. In this respect local consensus building would be the goal (Klenowski, 2007). Research could be undertaken to see if these kinds of sessions challenged or were incorporated into the guild knowledge of the more experienced examiners; resulting in a 'common use of the national grading sheet' (Norwegian Council for Higher Education, 2006: 15). This is especially important in the Norwegian context, where Dahl (2006) has questioned precisely inter-rater reliability. This might reflect among other things the difference between those new to examining and those who are more experienced. However, her explanation does not indicate if this is the case:

When examiners disagree negotiations begin. These are likely to pull down the grades of candidates who score highly with one examiner and pull up the grades of candidates who score low with one examiner. On the other hand, high examiner agreement increases the chances of positively affecting the decision for those who perform well and negatively affecting the decision for those who perform poorly (Dahl, 2006: 20).

Her data was based upon examiners individually, rather than collectively, grading 50 under-graduate essays in psychology against the original grades awarded by a different set of examiners. Her methodology mirrored statistical research on examiner inter-reliability dating back to the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Barnes and Pressey, 1929; Hertog and Rhodes, 1936; Starch and Elliot, 1912). My findings might also be interpreted to support her view of variations in examiner reliability, but since each post-graduate dissertation varies in topic, it might be expected that different examiners with different sub-disciplinary specialisms, will vary in their grading if they had been called upon to grade the same dissertation. Secondly, my interest has been in the actual grading and negotiating process, as an inter-subjective event. Her data involved no observation and her interviews of examiners were short (10 minutes). In sum, it might be the case that inter-reliability variance will always be present, and especially so in a form of assessment heavily dependent on what happens in the pre-viva, viva and post-viva meeting between different participants.

The arguments of this dissertation have their ancient roots, and can be contextualised as a defence of the oral against the written. Plato (2005) in *Phaedrus* wrote:

...and when once it is written, every composition trundles about everywhere in the same way, in the presence both of those who know about the subject and of those who have nothing at all to do with it (275e1).

Derrida (1978: 278) was famously scathing of such a view, in that it regarded writing as inferior compared to speech because it was nothing more than ‘a technique subservient to memory, an external auxiliary technique of psychical memory which is not memory itself’. Derrida might (mistakenly) be interpreted as having argued for the primacy of writing and a toning down of the role and primacy given to the oral.<sup>155</sup> In his own doctoral defence, he was somewhat apologetic of his decision to undertake an oral defence, regarding it as an awkward ‘self-justification, self-submission’ (1983: 50). However, in the context of this dissertation, one has to ask how much is gained by positioning speech and writing as opposites. Contemporary instances of the academic viva tend to be founded upon a mix that draws together the spoken and written, or the spoken and the performance of a skill, as in the case of some instances of the professional viva (e.g. performing a dance, followed by a viva). The viva constitutes, in the terminology of Chapter 3, a functional whole, drawing parts together in relations of dependency.

In a reversal of Derrida’s point, is it the case that the viva is nothing more than a supplement, and an inferior one at that, of the submitted dissertation? If this were the case, then there would be few arguments for retaining the viva. Would not a written report from examiners suffice, as has been the practice in Australia where vivas (for doctorates) are not held unless there are doubts about authenticity?

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<sup>155</sup> Derrida never argued either/or: either oral or writing. He looked for the space between the two and its deconstruction to expose *différance*, as a grounding principle (Steinnes, 2008). Nevertheless, his work can be regarded as a long exegesis upon a number of classical texts, such that his inclination was scholarly and towards writing/reading/text e.g. Rousseau’s *Emile* in *Of Grammatology* (1976).

Admittedly, they have the confirmation viva early in the doctoral students' research and a pre-submission viva closer to the date of submission, but they are not high stake final assessments. They are often more a source of motivation and a quality check on the emerging dissertation.

There are of course arguments (Levine and McGuire, 1970) about the different competencies required and "tested" in different forms of assessment, such as the inductive and deductive reasoning, typical of speech based/viva examinations, as compared with recall in multiple choice examination, and written examinations with a strength on interpretation. But, these arguments are not in themselves sufficient to justify the viva, and it is necessary to recall functionalist (e.g. the viva integrates the candidate into the academic community), existential (e.g. the candidate must learn to master the anxiety of the viva and demonstrate courage), social practice (e.g. the viva as a ritual, but at the same time allowing the new to emerge as it takes place) and validity arguments to lend support to the view that the viva is still important.

With a background in ancient debates (Chapter 1), and recently collected empirical data (Chapters 5 and 7), this dissertation has sought to propose a theoretical and qualitative argument in defence of the viva. For the educational policy maker, there will be a trade-off between this kind of argument and the demand for other more economic and cost-effective forms of assessment, in the face of greater numbers of both under and post-graduate students<sup>156</sup>. Yet, with demand in the labour market for qualified graduates, better equipped with transferable skills, such as the ability to verbally communicate complex ideas in a competent, well-argued fashion<sup>157</sup>, and not merely through the use of rhetoric; what appear to be cost-effective forms of assessment in the short-run (e.g. written exams), may actually in the long-run be of less value, and on that premise, the demise of the viva may well have to be postponed. Therefore, the epoch of the viva may still have currency as an ontological space of Being<sup>158</sup>, where

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<sup>156</sup> These points might be framed within an accountability debate e.g. a representative of the Norwegian national board for quality in higher education (NOKUT) in a personal communication on the viva (6.11.07) understood the viva as a measure of 'output' comparable with other forms of output (written exam, multiple choice...etc).

<sup>157</sup> Another popular term for this is inter-personal competence (Memon *et al.*, 2008).

<sup>158</sup> The allusion to Heidegger (1971: 45) is deliberate and intended; and to his point on gathering together in order to 'to make space for' the existence of an activity or a thing. Another word he

candidates and examiners alike can meet face-to-face and create something of value.

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uses is *Ge-stell* meaning to draw together, enframe and bring forth. See Dobson (2008) for a more detailed reflection on the ontological space of the dissertation and the disputation.

# Glossary

## Clusters

Question and answer pairs during the viva are organised and arranged at higher level by the topic that clusters the questions and answers together. Thus, in the viva there might be several questions and answers on the methodology used by the candidate and they are grouped in a cluster, just as there might be a cluster on the findings of the dissertation and so on. For this reason, in this dissertation sequence organisation in the viva is defined as a block, group and most often as a cluster of questions and answers (and/or other language games), identifiable and organised around a topic (see Chapter 4).

## Construct

Constructs can refer to cognitive reasoning, and this is one of the ways in which psychologists have considered them. It is very much a contested concept. In this dissertation construct has a technical meaning associated with assessment theory and the work of Messick (1989, 1994). It includes not only cognitive reasoning (inductive reasoning, problem solving, arriving at inferences, meta-reflection on inductive and deductive reasoning), but communicative ability (confidence in dealing with different language games, such as interrogative and evaluative, and the transitions between them) and domain specific knowledge (knowledge of the discipline and a meta-reflection on how the knowledge components of the discipline are inter-connected). Candidate courage and enthusiasm might be considered evidence of emotional and existential constructs. But, they might also be considered as evidence of construct irrelevance when measured against the other constructs. Simplifying, the domain specific component is the 'know-that' and cognitive and communicative components are the 'know-how'. The emotional components are the 'know-how-it-feels' and provide insight into the ancient Greek 'know-thyself' (see Chapters 6 and 7).

### **Domination free conversation**

The domination free conversation, conceptualised by Habermas in his early work, has generated much discussion. It is connected with an ideal speech situation, where the 'authority of the better argument could assert itself against that of social hierarchy' and power invested in social roles (Habermas, 1989: 36). On one count, even though he talked of his ideal character, the accusation has been made that there is little point in theorising it if it can never be realised. On another count, the authority of the better argument, precisely because it is the better argument, can be used to discipline. This is a point analogous to the view that with the rise of meritocracy, those possessing roles founded upon merit, will be able to use the achieved status to discipline (and oppress) those who do not possess such merits. While retaining an awareness of these points, what is at issue in the context of this dissertation is how rationality, as the better argument or as some other form of rationality, is used. If it is used to discipline, then it is no longer indicative of a domination free conversation/situation.

### **Judgment**

Validation of examiner judgments have been theorised as the integration of 'empirical evidence and theoretical rationales (that) support the adequacy and appropriateness of inferences' (Messick, 1989:13). But, examiner judgments contain other dimensions such that they are related to: tacit in-the-head norms shared with colleagues and rarely made explicit; analytical (with pre-specified criteria and the search for their evidence in the work of the candidate) or configurational judgments (with a holistic impressionistic or intuitive assessment first, and then its substantiation by referring to criteria which may or may not overlap); evaluative language games; and, grading decisions legitimated through the appeal to extrinsic narratives (see definition of narratives in glossary). Furthermore, a main point in this dissertation is that examiner judgments are reached on the basis of inter-subjective, face-to-face discussions between examiners. Examiner judgments are therefore multi-dimensional, rather than defined by a single characteristic (**Chapter 6**).

## **Language game**

In the viva, a limited number of language games can be identified, such as the report, interrogative, evaluative and greeting language games. Inspired by Wittgenstein (1994) and Lyotard and Thébaud (1985), a language game is connected to a form of life, or in my terminology, to a social practice. The term language game does not mean that language is used in a childish, playful manner with no consequence for reality. Language games are both played and used in real situations with real consequences. The gaming component of the language game refers to the serious, but playful manner in which new moves in the language game are played and can modify the social practice. The opposite is also possible, with a change in the social practice modifying the moves in the language game. Wittgenstein distinguished between simpler, more primitive language games and more advanced complicated ones (§2, 1994). I have not attempted this as it leads to the problem of defining the terms primitive, advanced and graduations between the two, along with the implication that certain social practices are more primitive, and as a consequence less worthy than others (**see Chapter 3**).

## **Narratives**

Narratives give the social practice of the viva an ordered and meaningful character, and narrative competence (Dobson, 2005) is the ability of the participants to create and deal with different aspects of narratives. Narratives can be multi-directional, multi-accented and multi-punctual. This is in addition to the classic understanding of narratives as involving emplotment, sense making and the desire for narrative rationality. In this dissertation, further distinctions are proposed between intrinsic (flow of the viva from beginning to end, and from pre-viva examiner meeting, to viva and post-viva examiner meeting) and extrinsic narratives (narratives in research literature, for example, that are external to the viva and drawn upon by examiners or candidates to legitimate their arguments), and between master (a participant's use of a narrative to achieve dominance in the course of the viva) and small narratives (an alternative narrative attacking this dominance) (**see Chapter 4**).



## **Social practice**

On a systems level, the viva functions to ensure the social integration of the candidate into the scientific community of their chosen field. On a personal level, the viva is the source of existential experiences, for example, as a show of courage or anxiety. Between both of these levels and yet supporting both, the viva is a social practice. By this it is meant that the viva is constructed by participants who meet together with the final goal of arriving at a grade. Participants have allocated roles, and cannot behave as they wish, such that the social practice entails normative implications. But, the norms are not given in a once and for all manner, they have to be enacted and performed (Goffman, 1969), and the emergence of new ones remains an ever-present possibility. Interaction is constructivist, and as a consequence, social forms are emergent and visible in social practices (see **Chapters 3 and 8**).

## **Validity**

Validity has been given different definitions in assessment theory: Criterion validity (approx. origin 1915) where an assessment is measured against a criterion, predictive validity (origin 1930/40s) measures the degree to which an assessment anticipates some quality (e.g. those with A or B grades manage their post-graduate study in a confident manner), content validity (origin late 1940s/early 1950s) measures the extent to which the assessment evidence measures what it is intended to measure (e.g. a driving test), concurrent validity (1939/40s), similar to criterion validity, but to do with how an assessment correlates with other measures of the same construct. (e.g. multiple choice vs. viva assessment of a candidate's ability in Norwegian), divergent or discriminate validity (approx. origin late 1950s) shows that an assessment is not highly correlated with other assessments designed to measure theoretically different concepts (e.g. an assessment to speak Norwegian is not correlated with a performance assessment in playing the piano). Some have talked of ecological validity. This is to do with whether the assessment can be applied to real life situations (Patry, 2004). Construct validity considers validity not as a fixed property of a test/assessment (typical of some of the types of validity presented above), but as connected with the process of validation and constructs that the

examiners and test developers are seeking to assess (see **construct entry in the Glossary and Chapter 6**).

### **Viva**

In Anglo-Saxon parts of the world, the term used for an oral examination is the viva, coming from the Latin *viva voce*, meaning ‘by the living voice’. In other European countries, the term disputation (*disputas* in Norwegian) is used. This is more in keeping with the term used in ancient times, and the Middle Ages. I use the term viva (‘by the living voice’) with the understanding that it incorporates, without eliminating the meanings and social practices of the earlier term disputation (see **Introduction and Chapter 1**).

# Appendix I

NB: All interviews took place in Norwegian. Norwegian questions are shown in brackets

## Interview guide no. 1 (prior to day of examining)

Interview no.:

Date for interview:

Position (e.g. professor, senior lecturer, other...etc):

Approx. no. years of experience examining viva:

Face-to-face interview or telephone:

Open questions:

1. Tell me of some of your memorable experiences of viva? (Fortell meg om noen av dine sterkeste minner om muntlig?...som student, som sensor)
2. What is the advantage of the viva in your opinion? Is it fair? (Hva er fordel med muntlig etter din mening? Er det rettferdig?)
3. Do you think the viva will or should disappear for different kinds of examination? Why? (Tror du muntlig vil eller skulle forsvinne for forskjellige typer prøver? Hvorfor?)
4. Do you envisage an ideal form for the viva? Do you try to achieve it? (Er det en ideal form av muntlig? Streber du etter den?)
5. Do you think explicit criteria should be used in examining the viva (such as a check-list of questions)? (Skulle eksplisitt kriterier brukes i muntlig eksamen, f.eks. sjekk-liste?)
6. If you had researched the viva, how would you have done it/what looked for? (Hvis du skulle forsket på muntlig hva ville du har gjort/sett etter?)
7. What about the presence of the supervisor in the viva? (Om veilederensrolle i muntlig eksamen?)
8. Have I forgotten to ask anything? (Har jeg glemt å spørre deg om noe?)

## Interview guide no. 2 (post-viva context)

Interview no.:

Date for interview or focus group:

Position (e.g. professor, senior lecturer, other...etc):

Face-to-face interview or telephone:

Open questions:

1. Tell me how the viva went? (Fortell hvordan muntligen gikk?)
2. Were your preparations adequate (with respect to expectations, questions posed, answers given? (Hva dine forberedelser gode nok, men hensyn til forventninger, spørsmål stilt, svar gitt?)
3. Did the camera disturb you or play a role in the viva? (Forstyrte eller spilte kamera en rolle?)
4. Anything else you would like to add? (Er det noe mer du/dere vil tilføre?)

## Appendix II

**Grading sheet passed by the Norwegian Council of Higher Education in 2004. The descriptors are not subject specific**

symbol	description	General, qualitative description of valuation criteria
A	Excellent	An excellent performance, clearly outstanding. The candidate demonstrates excellent judgement and a high degree of independent thinking.
B	Very good	A very good performance. The candidate demonstrates sound judgement and a very good degree of independent thinking.
C	Good	A good performance in most areas. The candidate demonstrates a reasonable degree of judgement and independent thinking in the most important areas.
D	Satisfactory	A satisfactory performance, but with significant shortcomings. The candidate demonstrates a limited degree of judgement and independent thinking.
E	Sufficient	A performance that meets the minimum criteria, but no more. The candidate demonstrates a very limited degree of judgement and independent thinking.
F	Fail	A performance that does not meet the minimum academic criteria. The candidate demonstrates an absence of both judgement and independent thinking.

In Norwegian,

symbol	betegnelse	generell, ikke fagspesifikk beskrivelse av vurderingskriterier
A	fremragende	Fremragende prestasjon som klart utmerker seg. Kandidaten viser svært god vurderingsevne og stor grad av selvstendighet.
B	meget god	Meget god prestasjon. Kandidaten viser meget god vurderingsevne og selvstendighet.
C	god	Jevnt god prestasjon som er tilfredsstillende på de fleste områder. Kandidaten viser god vurderingsevne og selvstendighet på de viktigste områdene.
D	nokså god	En akseptabel prestasjon med noen vesentlige mangler. Kandidaten viser en viss grad av vurderingsevne og selvstendighet.
E	tilstrekkelig	Prestasjonen tilfredsstiller minimumskravene, men heller ikke mer. Kandidaten viser liten vurderingsevne og selvstendighet.
F	ikke bestått	Prestasjon som ikke tilfredsstiller de faglige minimumskravene. Kandidaten viser både manglende vurderingsevne og selvstendighet.

## **Appendix III**

This appendix presents the transcripts from the filmed viva for the nursing educator. It includes the pre-viva examiner meeting, viva and post-examiner meeting. It is important to note that some parts of this transcript are considered in depth in the main dissertation. They are not reproduced in what follows and the reader is directed to the appropriate chapter.

### **Pre-viva examiner meeting (45 minutes)**

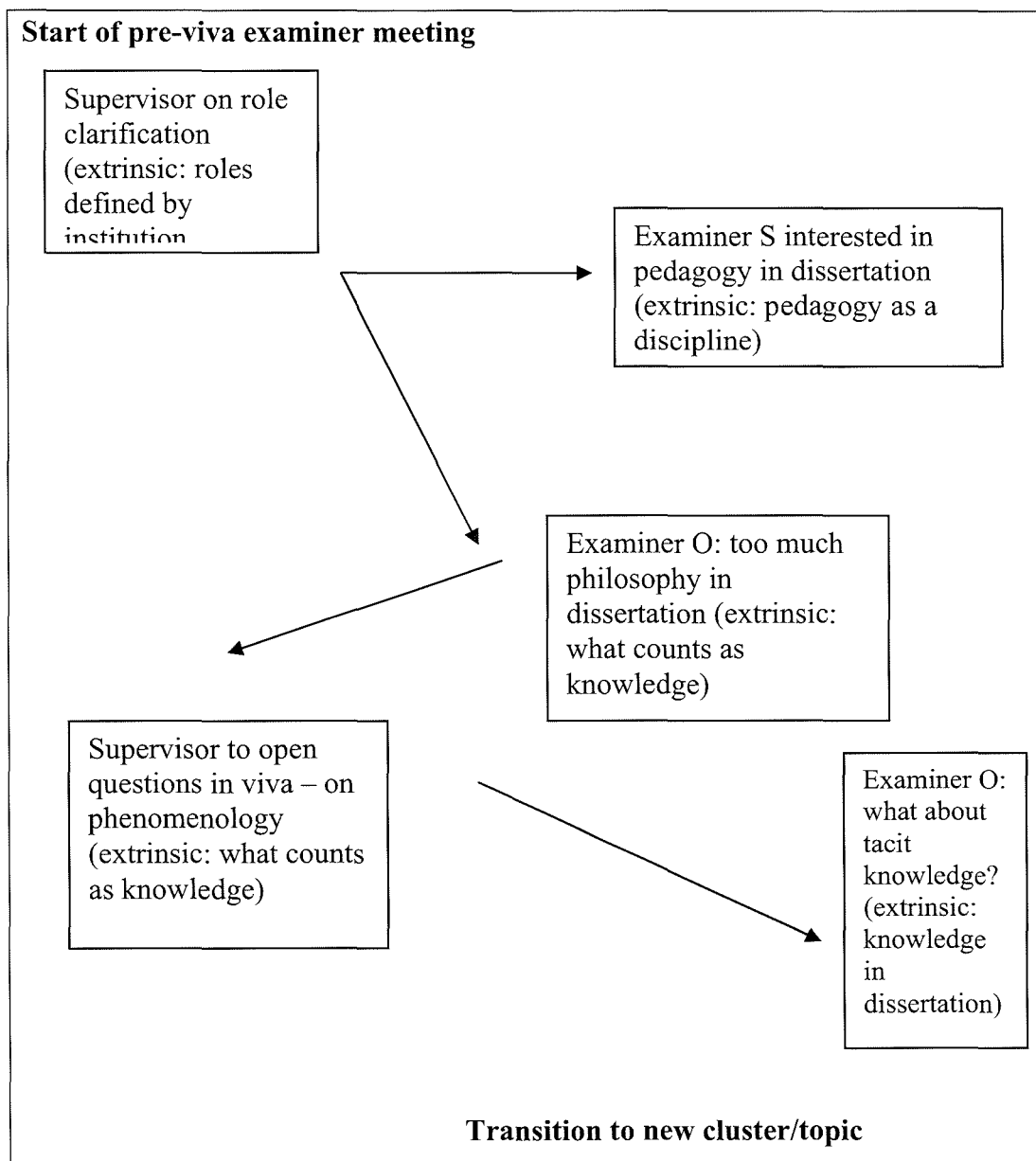
In the pre-viva, the examiners drew upon a limited number of extrinsic narratives. The institutional narrative was about clarifying roles and rules. Pedagogy as a discipline and the professional practitioner, reflection and practice were recurring sources of legitimacy, along with methodology and knowledge. The last mentioned also included at times the manner in which knowledge could have corporeal experiences as its source. The camera was a narrative in terms of making sure all were included in its vision. The point to note is that there were a limited number of narratives.

A second point to note is that the movement between clusters was not always smooth. On occasion it was abrupt and came without warning.

### **Opening cluster in the pre-viva: role clarification**

There was a single source for this cluster of questions and answers in the pre-viva: role clarification, but two directions followed from this: firstly, examiner S wanted to ask questions on pedagogy or its lack in the dissertation; once raised, this was no longer pursued by participants at this time and was at this point a small narrative. Secondly, examiner O voiced a small narrative with a focus upon the excessive amount of philosophy in the dissertation and the confession that it was not one of his strengths, especially when phenomenology was in focus. The examiner's point was discussed further, and the agreement of the supervisor gave it the character of a master narrative. The supervisor agreed to open the viva with questions on phenomenology. Examiner O sought further clarification by asking

if the supervisor intended to ask about tacit knowledge, since it was in his opinion lacking in the candidate's dissertation.



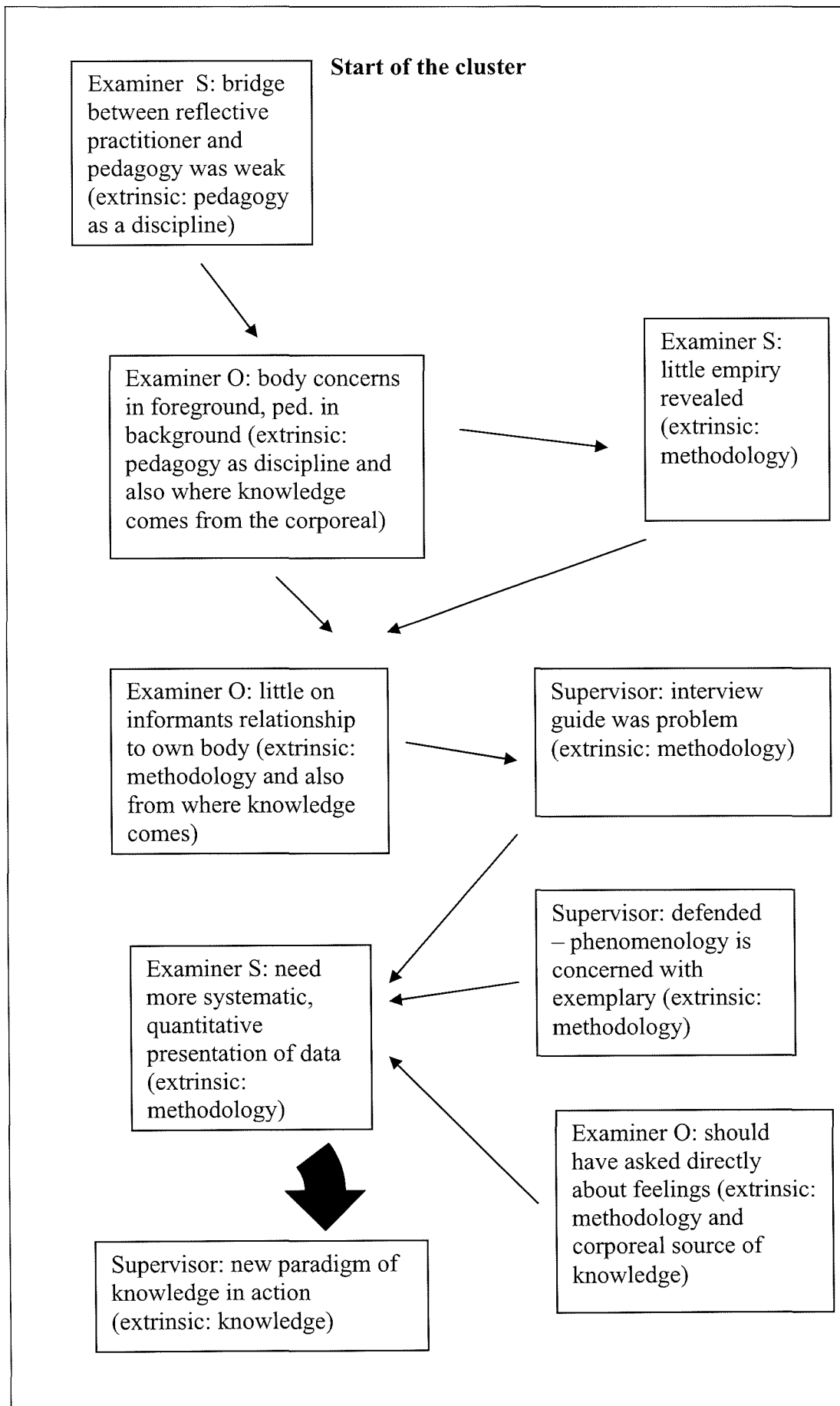
The supervisor answered in the negative and this marked the transition to a new cluster, focused on the relations between theory and practice and how they were conceptualised in the dissertation. The comments on tacit knowledge were therefore the link – there was no abrupt movement - between the two clusters and this cluster looked at the reflective practitioner, reflection and experience and theory and practice. The supervisor was on the defensive and the examiners posited and achieved the position of master narrative as they drew upon two extrinsic narratives: what counted as knowledge and the professional practitioner.



### **Pedagogy as a discipline and methodological issues**

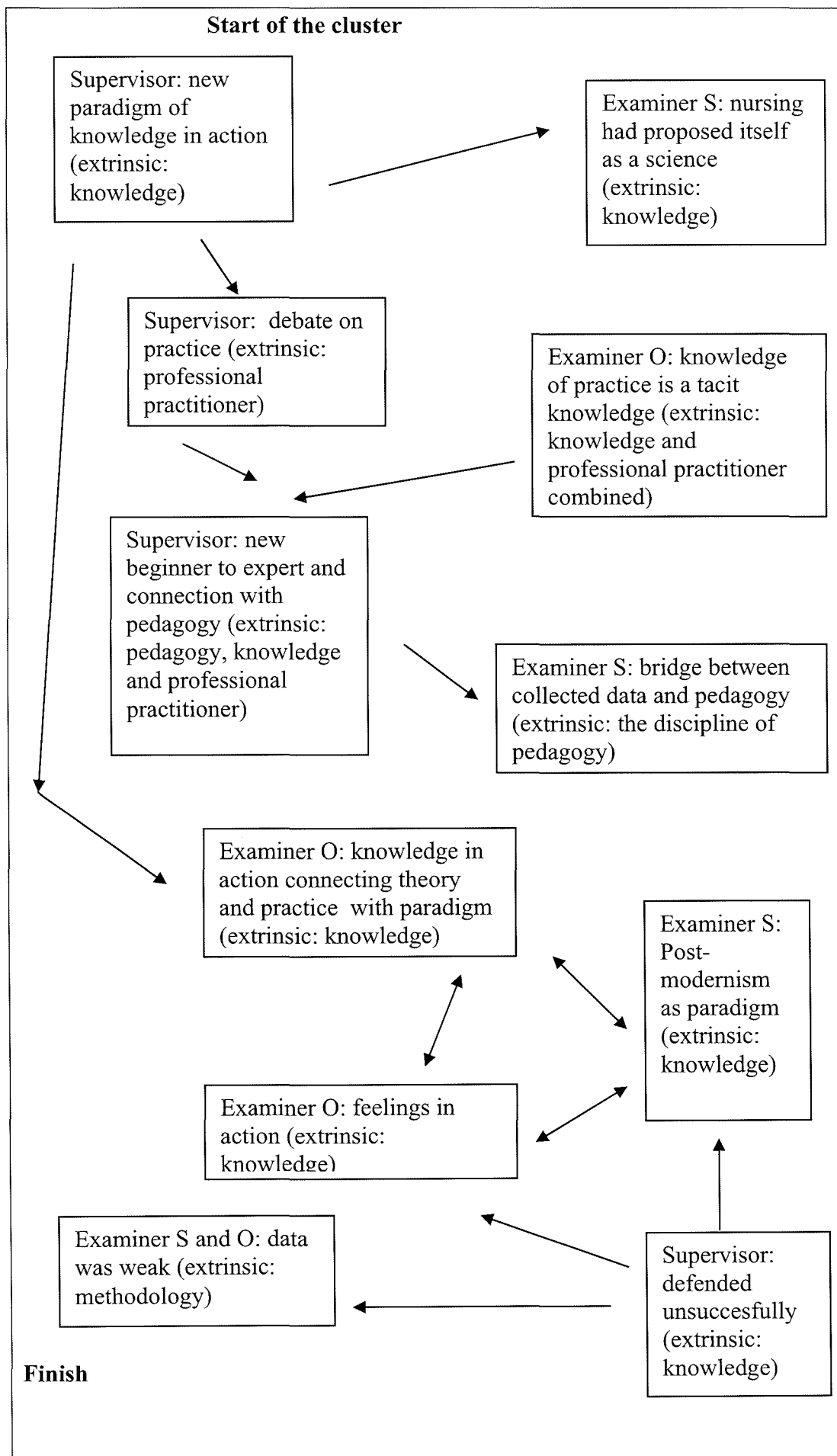
A new cluster concerned with the pedagogy as a discipline was introduced and this marked the end of the previous cluster on tacit knowledge. Note how there was no gradual transition and examiner S is redirecting talk to one of his previous comments in the pre-viva's opening cluster. Examiner O immediately noted how concern with the nursing student's corporeal awareness was in the foreground and pedagogy in the background. This led on to a discussion of the dissertation's methodology and how the candidate had struggled to gain access to precisely knowledge of the body. The supervisor was once again on the defensive and admitted that the candidate's interview guide might be at fault because the questions were too open. The two examiners had different concerns in this cluster, one with the desire for a more quantitative presentation of data and the other with how to gain access to the feeling of informants. The supervisor conceded that their narrative on methodology was a master narrative and decided to end the cluster by introducing a new cluster of questions: had the candidate introduced a new paradigm?





## **Paradigms**

The supervisor focused his concern on paradigms by asking if knowledge-in-action was really new content in an existing paradigm or a new paradigm. In the dissertation the candidate had asserted that his work represented a new paradigm. Examiner S tried to answer that nursing had proposed itself as a science. The supervisor drew examiner O into the discussion by asking him about the debate on practice, so that the latter answered that knowledge of practice rested upon tacit knowledge, and this in turn recalled the opening cluster's concern with tacit knowledge. However none of the participants made this connection explicit. The supervisor re-directed the practice concern of the cluster by combining talk of the tacit knowledge with the 'new beginner to expert' debate inspired by Dreyfus with pedagogy. Examiner S responded by mentioning once again his interest in the bridges, this time between the collected data and pedagogy. Examiner O took the talk back to the supervisor's interest in knowledge-in-action and proposed that the data presented could not support the argument that the nurses' experience of theory and practice did not hang together. Examiner S added that the 'journey through post-modernism' was misplaced in the candidate's paradigm discussion, making the dissertation too abstract. Talking of feelings in action was no new finding according to examiner O. The supervisor was on the defensive and argued that he was responsible for the student mentioning post-modernism and writing on feelings. Examiner S. and examiner O agreed that the dissertation's data could not substantiate its claims. The supervisor's cautious belief in the candidate's new paradigm was discounted and rebuffed by the two examiners. They agreed at the end of this cluster that this was not the case and the supervisor's desire for a master narrative was smashed by the examiners as they countered with a more dominant view: the candidate's work had a number of methodological flaws.

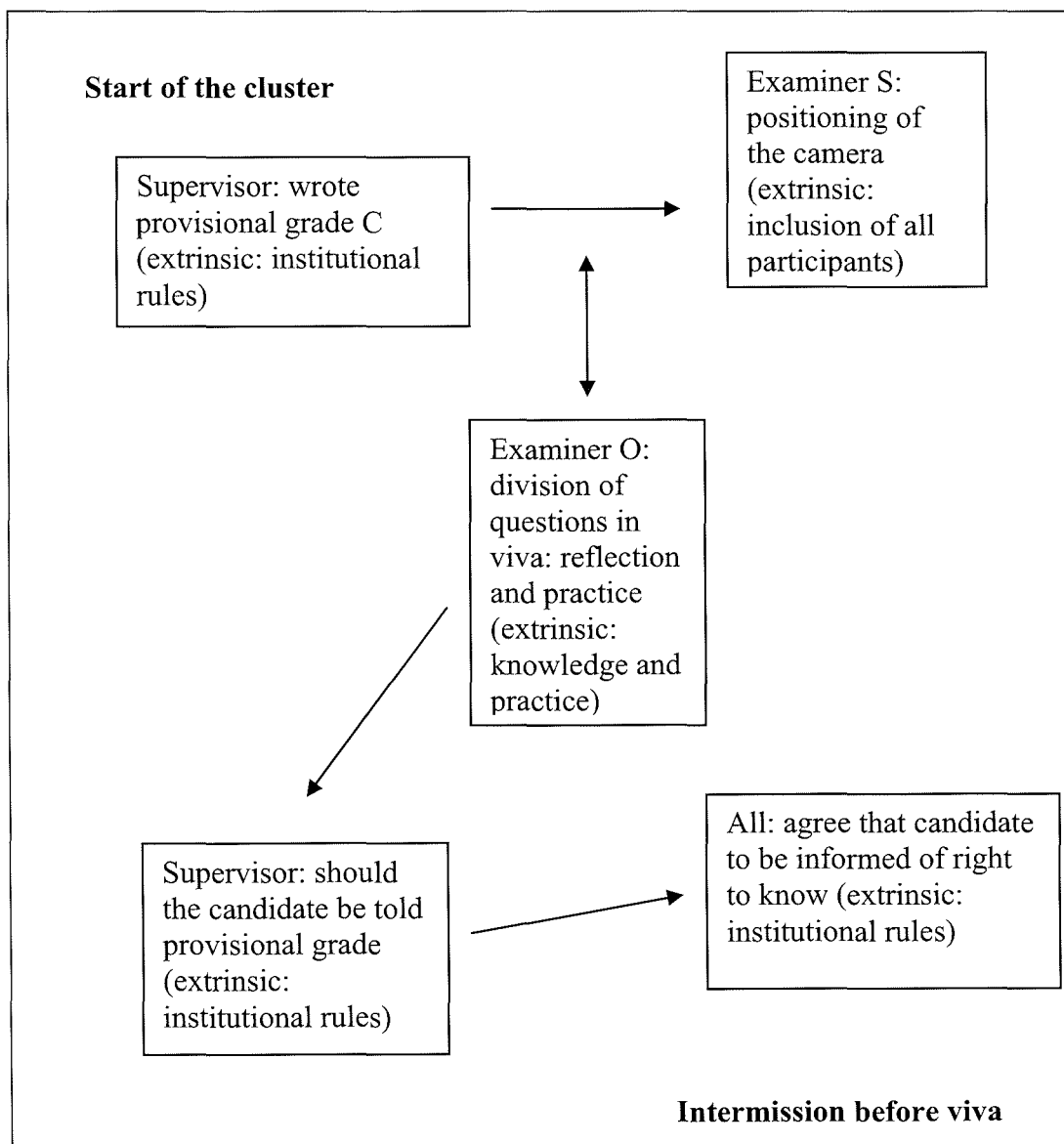


## Grading

The grading discussion is reproduced in the early part of Chapter 5.

### The camera and informing the candidate of the provisional grade

This transcript extract is to be found in Chapter 5 in the section on conversation analysis. The diagram below belongs to this cluster and was not included in Chapter 5.



### **The viva – (47 minutes in length)**

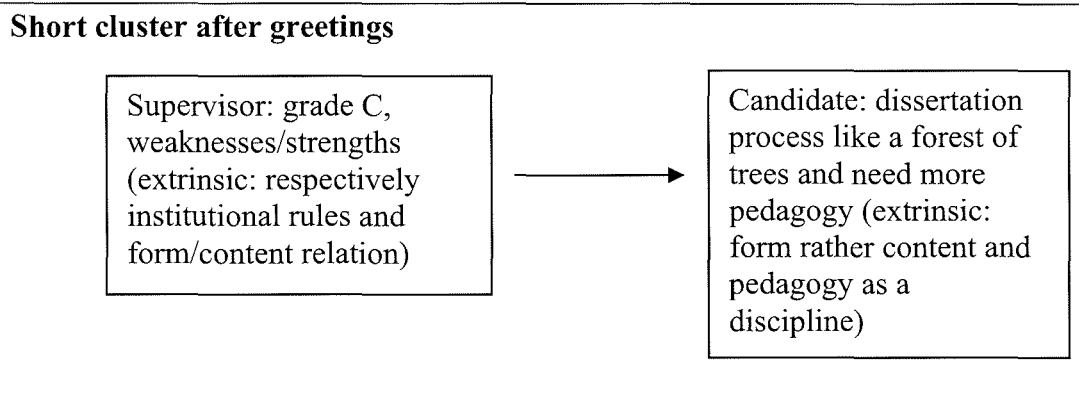
When the candidate entered the room for the viva, he was clearly tense, as revealed in his darting hand movements as he reached for his dissertation from his bag. By contrast the examiners and supervisor were at ease, having had the pre-examiner meeting to build up a relationship with each other. They were, of course, in a position to influence and determine the outcome of the viva, and as a result did not share the candidate's uncertainty about the outcome. Even though the outcome and final grade was not in principle unchangeable, they had already made it clear to each other that the onus was on candidate, who had to 'prove' himself, if he wanted to improve his grade.

In the viva all of the extrinsic narratives of the pre-viva were repeated, except the one concerning hesitation about institutional rules and roles. No new narratives were introduced, indicating that there were strong lines of continuity between the pre-viva and viva. There was no evidence of repair of conversation and the change between clusters was on occasions marked by a period of silence for several seconds. The viva was marked by a sense of order; such that participants did not have to fight for their turn or interrupt each other. The termination of the viva was announced in the final cluster by one of the examiners who stated that he didn't have any more questions

### **Opening cluster in the viva: strength and weaknesses**

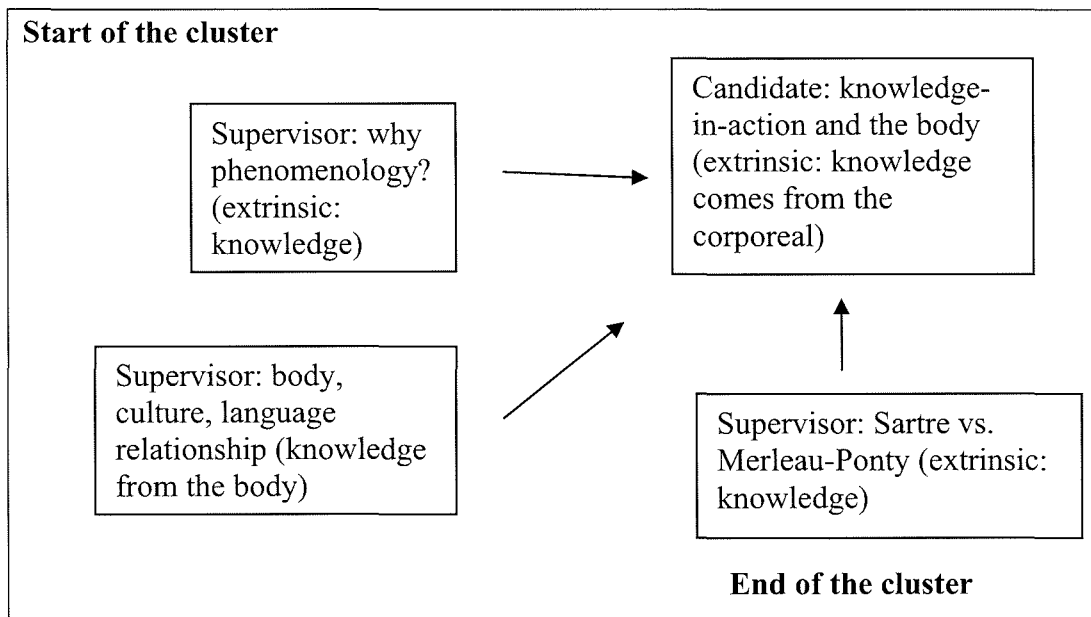
The viva opened with the examiners greeting the candidate. The supervisor informed the candidate that he had received a provisional grade of C and that a number of weaknesses and strengths had been identified in the dissertation. The candidate said nothing and showed no emotion in his face upon hearing the grade. Without saying any more about their content, the supervisor asked the candidate to reflect upon them. He confessed that while working on the dissertation, its form had been like 'a forest of trees with few clearings' and that he could have said more about the pedagogy. Without giving a reply or any feedback to his opening account of the dissertation the supervisor terminated the cluster abruptly by

beginning a cluster of questions. If there was a master narrative in this opening cluster, it is in the view expressed by the candidate and the supervisors (speaking with the 'we' on behalf of the others present) that the dissertation had strengths and weaknesses.



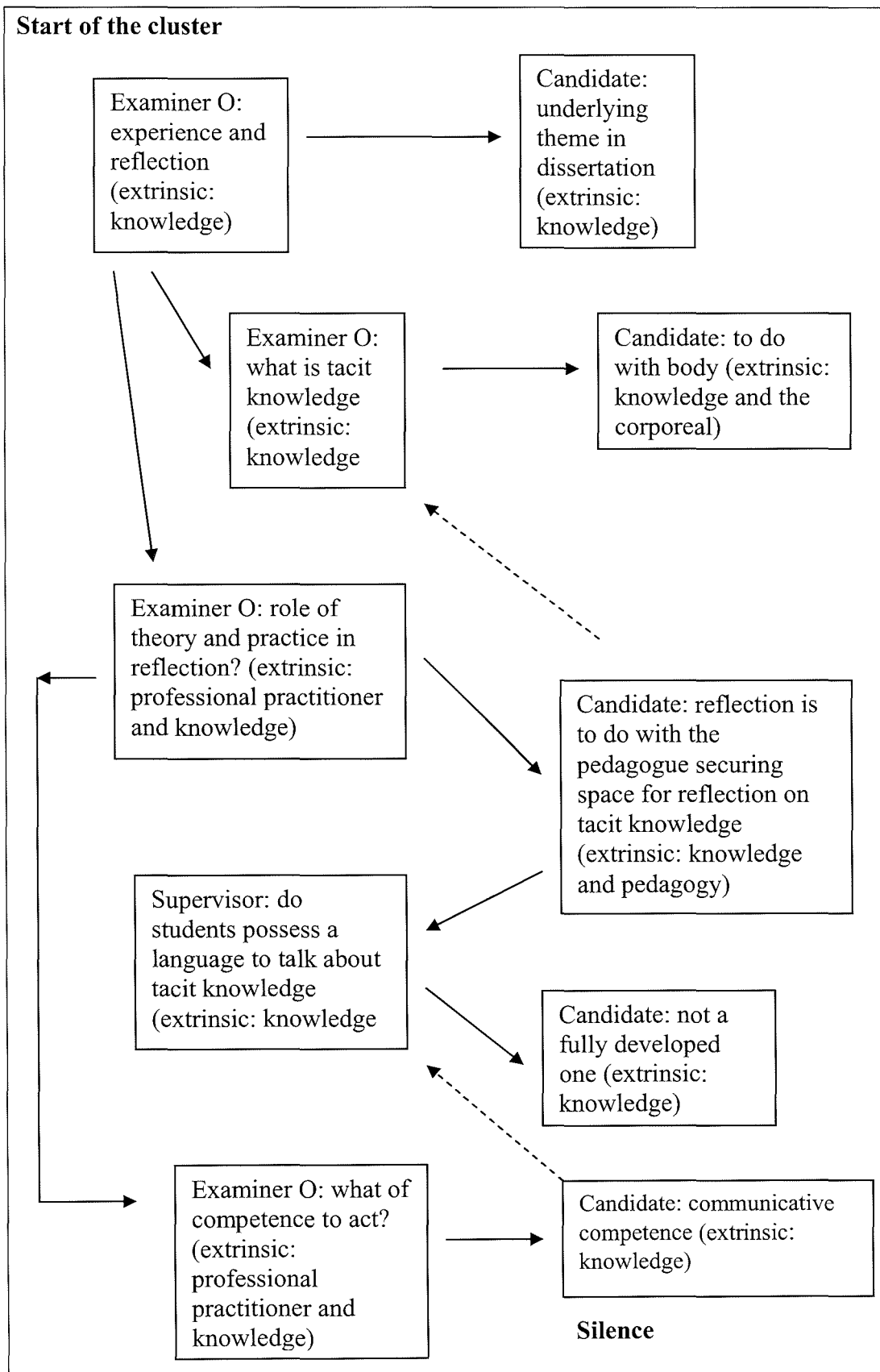
### Phenomenology

The supervisor asked a cluster of questions to do with the basis for the knowledge obtained in the dissertation; specifically, on the role of a phenomenological approach. To the question why phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty, the candidate answered that he was interested in how knowledge was acquired in learning situations, what he terms *kunnskap i handling* (knowledge-in-action) and its connection with bodily experience. The supervisor followed up with questions on the relationship between body, culture and language and the difference between Sartre and Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology. The candidate again located his concepts in Merleau-Ponty's philosophy and shied away from an understanding of Sartre's views. This cluster was terminated in a similarly abrupt manner by the supervisor announcing that he had no more questions at this time. Put differently, he handed over the turn. The master narrative was the view that phenomenology was the appropriate conceptual apparatus for producing knowledge on the topic. No alternative narratives were voiced to dispute in small narrative fashion this master narrative.



## Tacit knowledge

The following diagram belongs to the cluster discussed in Chapter 5, Ex. 2





## Methodology

The cluster of questions on methodology introduced by examiner S repeated a cluster in the pre-viva. Examiner S discussed methodology in connection with the candidate's chosen way of presenting the findings together with their analysis. Examiner S opened by stating that the findings, reflecting back to methodology, are what he will focus upon in this cluster. He asked if the candidate felt that he hadn't gained much from his informants. The candidate agreed and added that it was hard because the students lacked a language to talk about their experiences. Could a more systematic presentation of the data have been adopted, asked the examiner, so that the findings would not have *kokte bort* (evaporated). The following exchange took place:

**Candidate** I could have presented my material in pure numbers ((an open hand moving up a little, as if it was a scale with weights)) That could be one way=

**Examiner S** = I don't want to invite a quantitative approach, you state you want to keep to a qualitative methodology.

**Cand.** [No, N:::o]

**S** But to put it in a framework ((moves an open palm towards candidate, as if handing him something)) so it was presented in a manner that made it easier to follow. Because this was a small weakness in the dissertation.

**Cand.** Yes ·hhh But what I saw for myself as I wrote was the use of my categories. ((he was referring to the categories, grounded in his reading of the data))

**S** Yes, I understand

**Cand.** I see your points ((Candidate turns pages in the dissertation))  
B:::ut, I don't see at this moment how I could have done it. <sup>159</sup>

((For the duration of this exchange, the supervisor and internal examiner do not look up, they are studying the dissertation, turning pages))

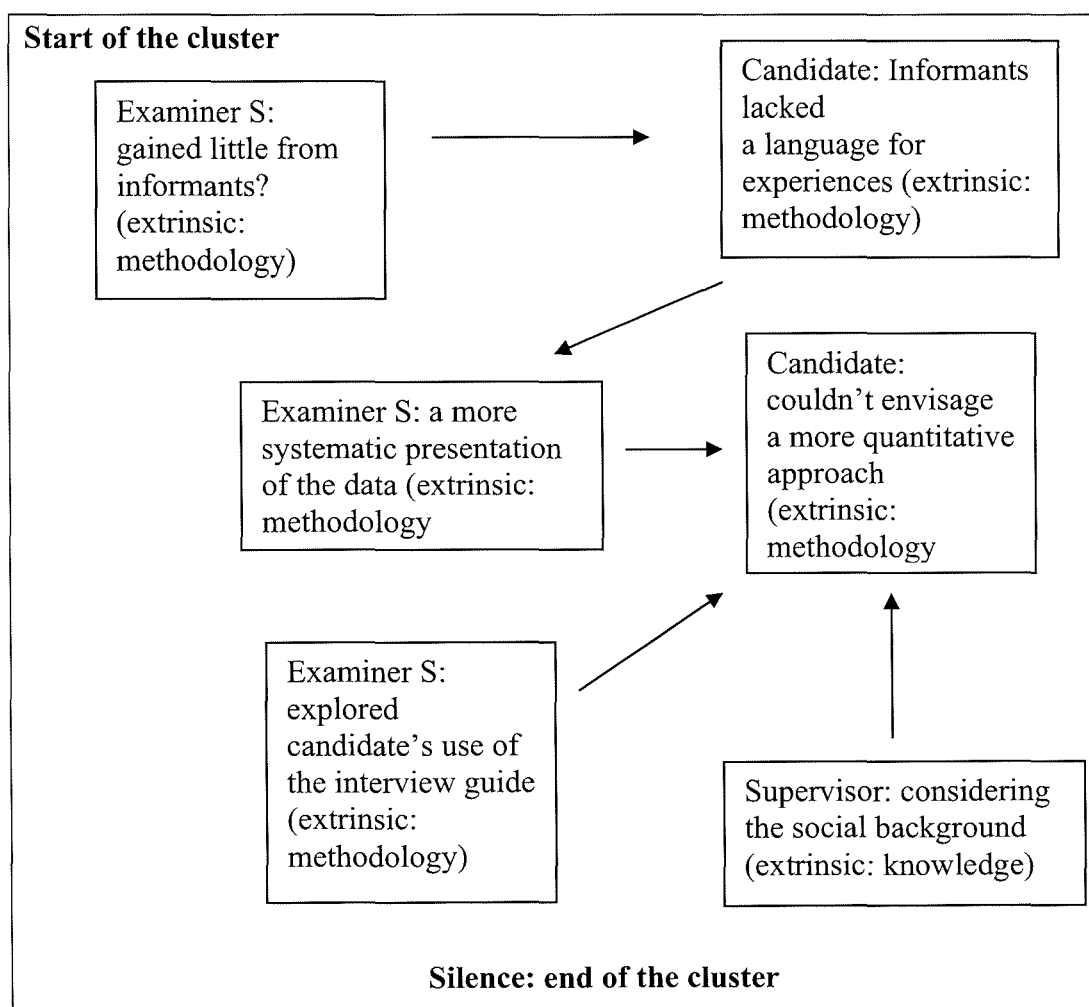
Examiner S asked if there was a great deal of informant data? The candidate said that there was, but it was necessary to make selections. The supervisor asked if the candidate had asked about the background social backgrounds of the informants and if they knew each other? The candidate answered it in the affirmative, but had

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<sup>159</sup> Jeg kunne ha presentert stoffet i rene tall. Det kunne ha vært en måte Jeg vil ikke invitere til en kvantitativ tilnærming, du sier selv at du vil holde med en kvalitativ metode.  
Men å sette det i en ramme slik at det ble presentert på en måte som var lettere å følge. Fordi dette var en lite svakhet i avhandlingen.  
Ja, men det jeg så for meg selv mens jeg skrev var bruk av kategoriene  
Ja, det forstår jeg  
Jeg ser dine poeng. Men jeg ser ikke akkurat nå hvordan jeg kunne ha gjort det.

not discussed these things in the dissertation. Examiner S resumed his questioning, asking how the candidate had used his interview guide.

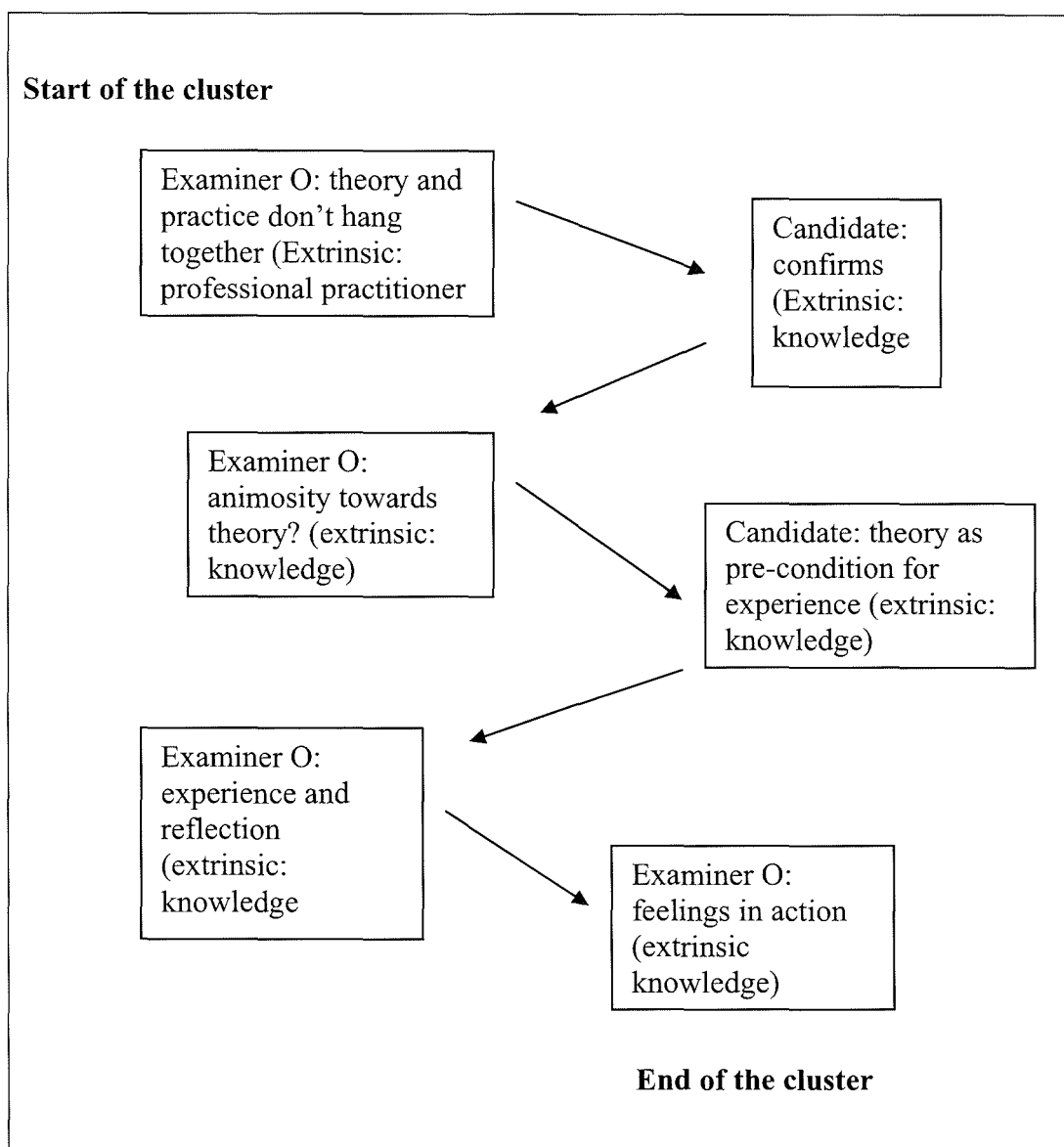
After the answer to this question examiner S looked down at the dissertation and flipped through several pages in a nonchalant manner. He said nothing for 4 seconds and then commented that he had finished exploring the findings and invited examiner O to proceed with a new cluster. In other words, he handed over the turn through an explicit invitation to the next speaker. In this cluster, there seemed to be a single master narrative; it was to do with a quantitative presentation of material and it is hard not to interpret this further in the direction that a more quantitative methodology should have been adopted at the outset. Did the candidate oppose this with a small narrative? Not directly. Instead, he indicated that he could not see how he could have done this quantitatively.



### **Theory and practice**

Examiner O directed attention to a particular paragraph in the dissertation's conclusion; one to do with the candidate's assertion that according to the nursing students theory and practice didn't 'hang together', and a new linguistic content was required for this relation. The candidate was asked to elaborate and did so by noting the manner in which theory tended to be unrelated to the practical reality in which nursing students found themselves. Is this because nurses held *teori fientlig* (animosity towards theory), asked the examiner. The candidate underlined how the term should not be a theory-practice split, but theory as a precondition for practice. The examiner countered that perhaps experience and reflection might be a conceptual pair to overcome this theory animosity. The candidate agreed. The examiner then explored another aspect of the theory and practice debate: that feelings as a component of action were natural and nothing new. The candidate agreed, but added that his point was to put a limit on emotional expression; and besides he admitted that Swedish was his first language, and his written Norwegian might be imprecise in place. Examiner O ended his turn by saying that he had clarified what he was unsure about.

This cluster demonstrates how the candidate's proposal to overcome the theory-practice dichotomy is resisted by the examiner, who manages to get the candidate to agree to the primacy of his conceptual pair: experience and reflection. Put differently, the examiner is able to gain the status of master narrative for his views, while the candidate's view is relegated to that of a small narrative.



### **Pedagogy and knowledge**

As examiner O finished his last word, examiner S immediately began a new cluster of questions on the lack of pedagogy and knowledge in the dissertation. This mirrored the particular examiner's interest in this in the pre-viva. This cluster, unlike the others in the viva, contained questions from each of the examiners and also the supervisor.

Examiner S asked about the candidate's view of pedagogy in the dissertation. The student replied that he had made an eclectic use of several theories. On being pushed to state his main pedagogy focus and source of inspiration, he cited the pragmatism of Dewey. Examiner O asked the candidate about his use of Ryle and

he responded by highlighting Ryle's importance for understanding tacit knowledge. The supervisor keeping to the topic of knowledge announced that he had only two more questions: one about the candidate's use of Martinsen's concept of care and the other about his understanding of the concept of paradigm. The candidate answered that Christian values had been important in his understanding of care and that the theory-practice debate was ripe for a revolutionary change in paradigms.

Eight seconds of silence occurred before examiner O announced that he was running out of questions. His last one was on the use of a Norwegian author called Dysthe who talked of dialogue. He probed the candidate's understanding of dialogue and how hard it was to get data on the student's use of their bodies using his interview guide:

**Examiner O** In the interview guide you asked about their own body (2.0)  
 You gained::::there was some confusion ((implied: for students))  
 How how did you tackle this in an interview situation?

**Candidate** I was very, mmm, I was very surprised and thought What!  
 Am I to get no information at all, what shall I do now? I  
 thought, now I must try to put it in a form that they recognise  
 (3.0) But then there was the (danger) of putting words in their  
 mouths. But I decided I would rather do this than gain  
 nothing.

**O** Could you:::this is only as an afterthought, an afterthought  
 (2.0) Could you. These are only words here ((pointing to the  
 interview guide reproduced in the dissertation)) and not what  
 you asked. But could you have used another concept than  
 own body? How have you reflected on this.

**Cand.** (8.0)Yes·hhh It is clearly a possibility ((Tom had leaned  
 forward in the 8 second pause, and now leans back)) but I  
 tried to agree with them what it was=

**O** =you said what it was first?=  
 =and or if I do this it is in a way, so to speak, to put words in  
 their mouth to tell them first or agree together

**Cand.** [It becomes a dilemma]

**Exmainer O** [It becomes a dilemma]  
**Cand.** Yes it is a dilemma. What about your body, how do you  
 experience it? Because all have a body and all must have a  
 relationship to it in concrete situations of interaction ((an arm  
 moving to and fro, to indicate a relation))

**O** Some answered b:::ut not all of them=

**Cand.** =Some were more vague°But when the perspective of how  
 the course regarded the body was introduced it was a little  
 different. A little easier but the focus was still on physical

appearance and strength.<sup>160</sup>

Once again, this can be read as a further instance of the construct of experience and how to make first order knowledge explicit and of a second order scientific character.

There was a 5 second silence after this, during which examiner S nodded to the supervisor and examiner O turned away from the candidate and began to close his copy of the dissertation. The supervisor looked quickly at the two examiners and said:

OK, now you can go and wait in the corridor and we will continue the discussion

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<sup>160</sup> I intervjuguiden du spurte dem om deres kropp. Da fikk du:::det var litt stuss. Hvordan hvordan taklet du dette i intervju situasjon?

Jeg var veldig forbause og tenkte få jeg ikke data i det hele tatt. Da tenkte jeg må sette det I en perspektiv som de kjenner. Det var en fare å legge svarene i munnen. Men jeg bestemte at jeg vil heller gjør dette enn å ikke få noe.

Kunne du det er bare i ettertid kunne du disse er bare ord og ikke hva du spurte men kunne du ha brukt et annet begrep enn kropp. Har du reflektert på det?

Ja, det er helt sikkert mulig men det som jeg var opptatt av var å finne deres nivå å bli sammen med dem om det

Og du sa hva det var først

Og om jeg gjør det legger jeg ord i munnen på en måte eller bli enig sammen

Det blir en dilemma

Ja det det er en dilemma. Hva om din egen kropp, hvordan erfares det? Fordi alle har en kropp og alle må ha et forhold til det i konkret situasjoner

Noen svarte men ikke alle

Noen var mer vag. Men nå perspektivet var hvordan kurset så på kroppen var det litt annerledes.

Det var lettere men fokus var fremdeles på fysisk presentasjon og styrke.

### Start of the cluster

Examiner O: How  
does pedagogy figure  
in your thinking?  
(extrinsic: pedagogy  
as a discipline)

Examiner S: What role  
has Ryle played?  
(extrinsic: knowledge)

Supervisor: The concept  
of care and need for  
paradigm change  
(extrinsic: knowledge)

Candidate: eclectic,  
pragmatic view of  
pedagogy; Ryle's  
inspiration to understand  
tacit knowledge; care is  
important in  
understanding care and  
the need for a paradigm  
change (extrinsic:  
pedagogy and knowledge)

Silence

Examiner O:  
dialogue and getting  
data (extrinsic:  
methodology)

Candidate: putting  
words into the mouth  
of informant  
(extrinsic:  
methodology)

**Candidate told to leave the room and await result of examiner discussion**

### **The post-viva examiner meeting (9 minutes)**

During the opening cluster of the post-viva meeting, both examiners looked at the supervisor when they spoke. On one hand, this indicated that they wanted his agreement on their views. On the other hand, this might be interpreted to mean that they wanted to impose their views upon him. In the grading cluster the examiners orientated their bodies towards each other and were less interested in securing the agreement of the supervisor. This might be because it was the supervisor who himself proposed the C, and they did not have to make him lower his original pre-viva grade of A.

Of interest is the manner in which some of the post-viva clusters mirrored and either explicitly or implicitly referred back to clusters in the pre-viva. This meant that the extrinsic narratives moved backwards rather than forwards, providing examples of what Jefferson (1978: 221) called *embedded repetitions*. Equally interesting is the fact that the debate on the candidate's choice of methodology and its weaknesses is not mentioned in the post-viva until the candidate is told his final grade. By the end of the post-viva, the supervisor and examiners have agreed that lack of a focus on pedagogy and its connection with practical activity is the main weakness in the dissertation; and this becomes the dominant master narrative of this dissertation. The extrinsic narratives in the post-viva were the following: knowledge, pedagogy as a discipline, knowledge comes from the corporeal, institutional rules, methodology.

In the 18 minute interview immediately after this viva, the candidate agreed that the internal and external examiner had not really liked the goal and topic of his dissertation. As to the issue of his not having put enough on 'education' in the dissertation, he reflected that it depended on the definition of education. On a narrow definition, he had not included enough traditional educational concepts and the supervisor commented that the question, 'what is education?' had not been raised in the viva. In sum, the candidate was clearly disheartened by the reception of the dissertation by the examiners. Furthermore, with a grade C, the candidate was not qualified to apply for a doctoral course to pursue his research.



## **Tacit knowledge**

Examiner O opened the first post-viva cluster noting that the candidate had not reflected enough on the role of the body, as they had suspected in the pre-viva. The supervisor agreed with the examiner and noted that the candidate was able to admit his mistakes. The examiner continued by noting that the candidate could have used his data differently, to approach educational issues more closely. Examiner S took up this thread to say that the candidate had no clear view of education. Examiner O suggested that the educational discussion should have been around tacit knowledge. He continued:

**Examiner O** But what is tacit knowledge then? It is knowledge that only develops through action. You can't develop it only through theory. I:::t must be implicit and taken for granted=

**Supervisor** =I not think (2.0) the positive with the dissertation as a whole and as a person. He has managed what people who often write about their own field don't. He created a distance and created scientific knowledge. He managed to step out of his role ((extending arms like a stretched elastic band)) but as you say Examiner S he hasn't developed the educational perspective enough.

**Examiner O** [the educational concepts]

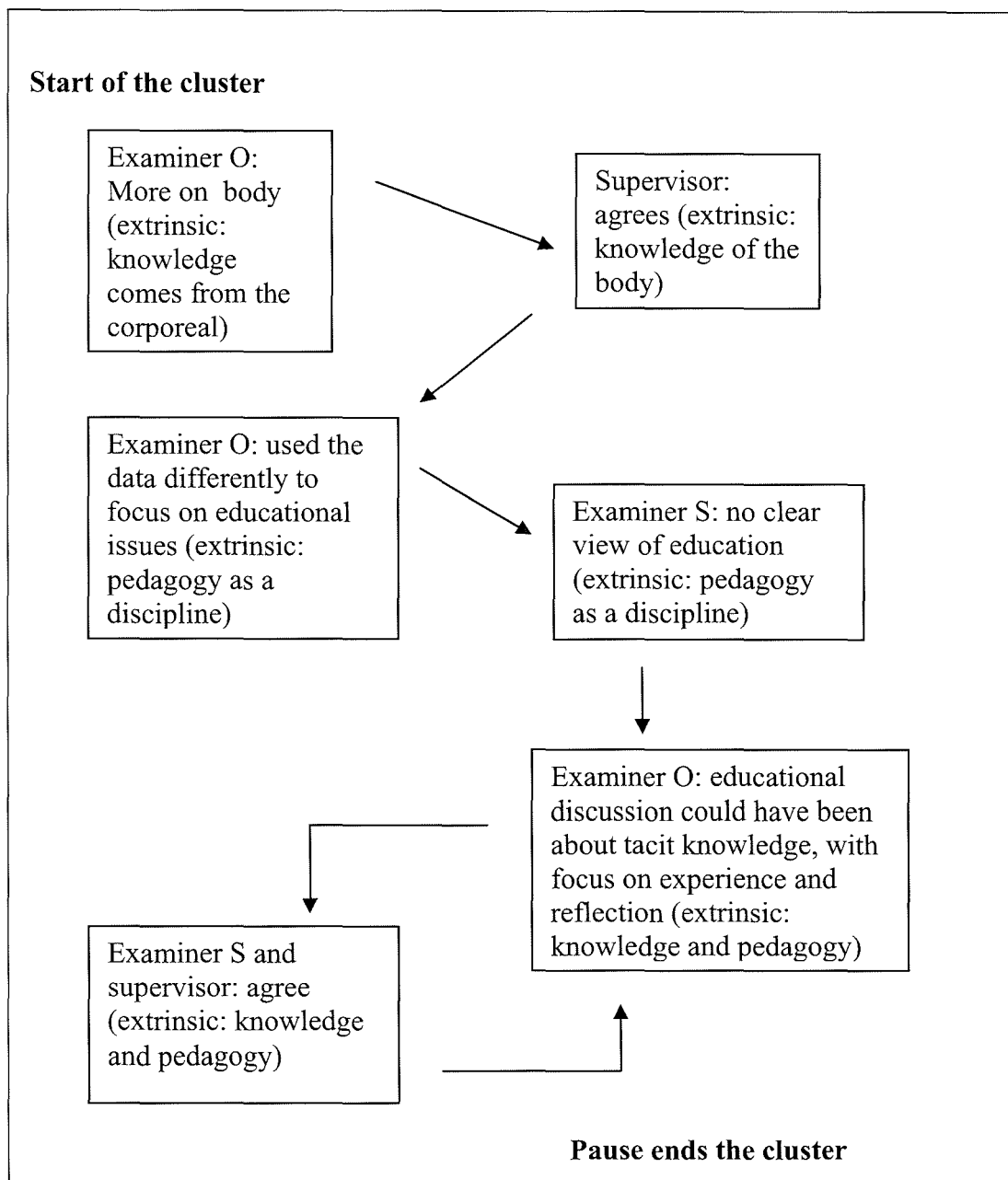
**Examiner S** =This is really away] from education even though he involves nurse education as a focus. He a little weak on this point. ((bringing his hands to together in a cup)) <sup>161</sup>

After this examiner O repeats his view that tacit knowledge is where experience and reflection should have been a central conceptual pair. The supervisor stretches and this causes the examiner to pause for 3 three seconds. At the end of this short pause the supervisor introduces a new cluster on the final grade.

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<sup>161</sup> Men hva er taus kunnskap? Det er kunnskap som kan bare utvikles gjennom handling. Du kan ikke utvikle det bare teoretisk. Det må være implisitt og inneforstått. Jeg tror ikke det positive med avhandlingen som helhet og som en person. Han har greid hva folk som vanligvis skriver om feltet ikke greier. Han har skapt avstand og skapt vitenskaplig kunnskap. Han greid å tre utenfor sin rolle men som du sier Examiner S har han ikke utviklet det pedagogiske perspektiv nok. Pedagogiske begreper

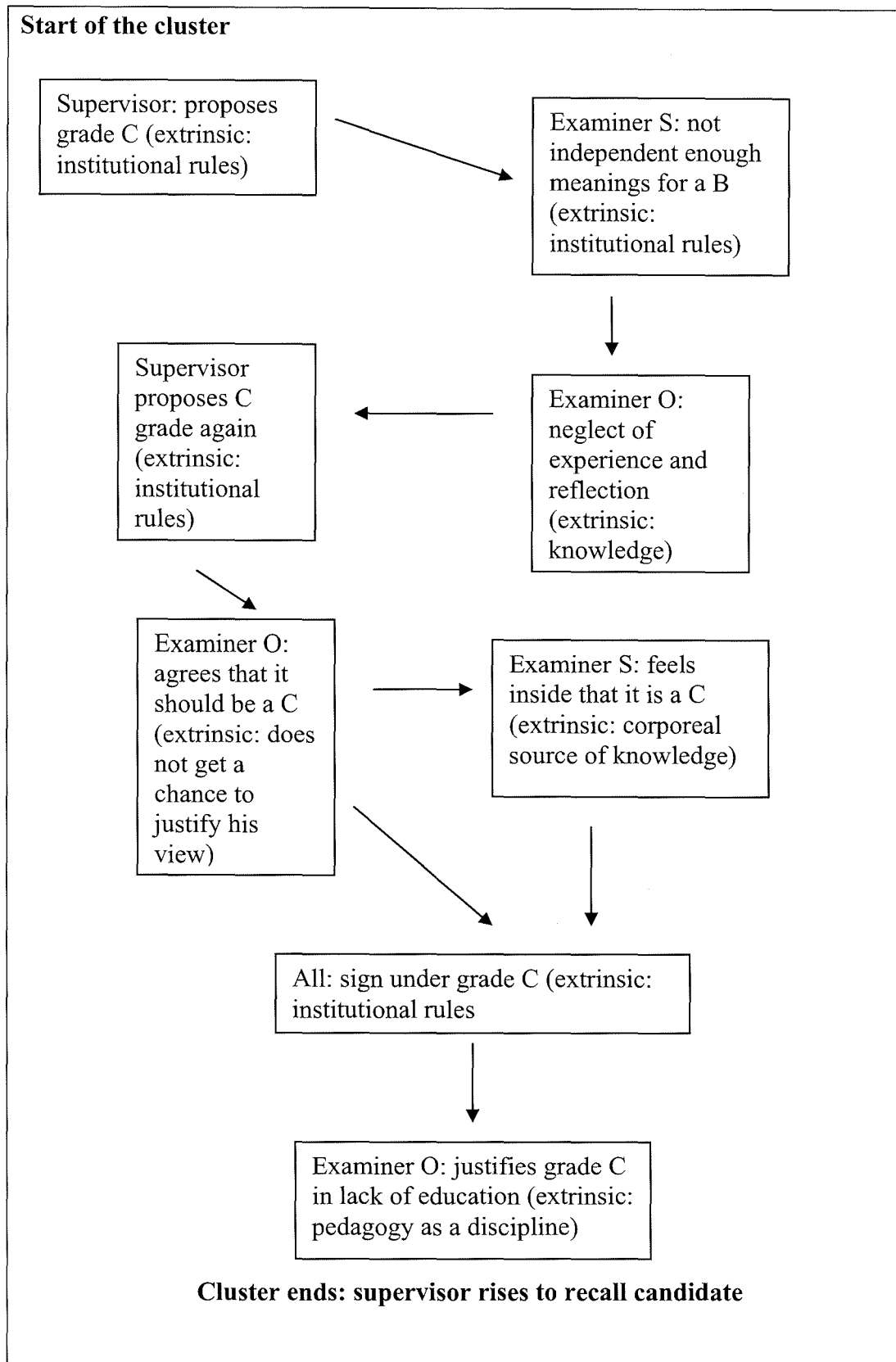
In this cluster on tacit knowledge there was evidence of a clear master narrative, where the examiners and the supervisor agreed that the candidate had not drawn out the educational implications of his research.



Det er egentlig bort fra pedagogikk selv om han har sykepleier utdanning som en fokus. Han er litt

## Grade setting

This cluster is reproduced and discussed as Ex. 3 in Chapter 5. This is the cluster's diagram.



### Telling the candidate

It is agreed that the student should be informed of his grade by the internal examiner. The supervisor left the room to call in the candidate. The candidate entered the room for the examination once again and on sitting was immediately told the following by examiner O:

**Examiner O** We have agreed that you are to remain on C.

**Candidate** Y(·hh)es)

**Examiner O** Some comments. It was an exciting dissertation. The first part was really good. You have done a really good job. It was interesting to read=

**Candidate** [°Thank you°]

**Examiner O** = and the bit on method was as examiner S said in the viva exemplary. Where it is weak is in the educational. You don't manage you don't manage. It disappears.

**Candidate** °Disappears. Ye::s°

**Examiner O** As it is the educational is too vague and it remains too philosophical.

**Candidate** More concrete

**Examiner O:** More along these lines the data could have been kind of used to make educational points. So that is ou::r meaning ((internal examiner taps the dissertation with his finger)) You have done a good piece of work. And I think it is important that you continue working with the topic. Very important

**Candidate** [Thank you I will take these comments ( ) with me] <sup>162</sup>

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<sup>162</sup> Vi har blitt enig at du blir stående på C

Noen kommentar. Det var en spennende avhandling. Første delen var virkelig god. Du har jobbet bra. Det var interessant å lese

Takk

Og metode gjennomgang var eksemplarisk. Det var svak når det gjelder det pedagogiske. Du greier ikke du greier ikke. Det forsvinner.

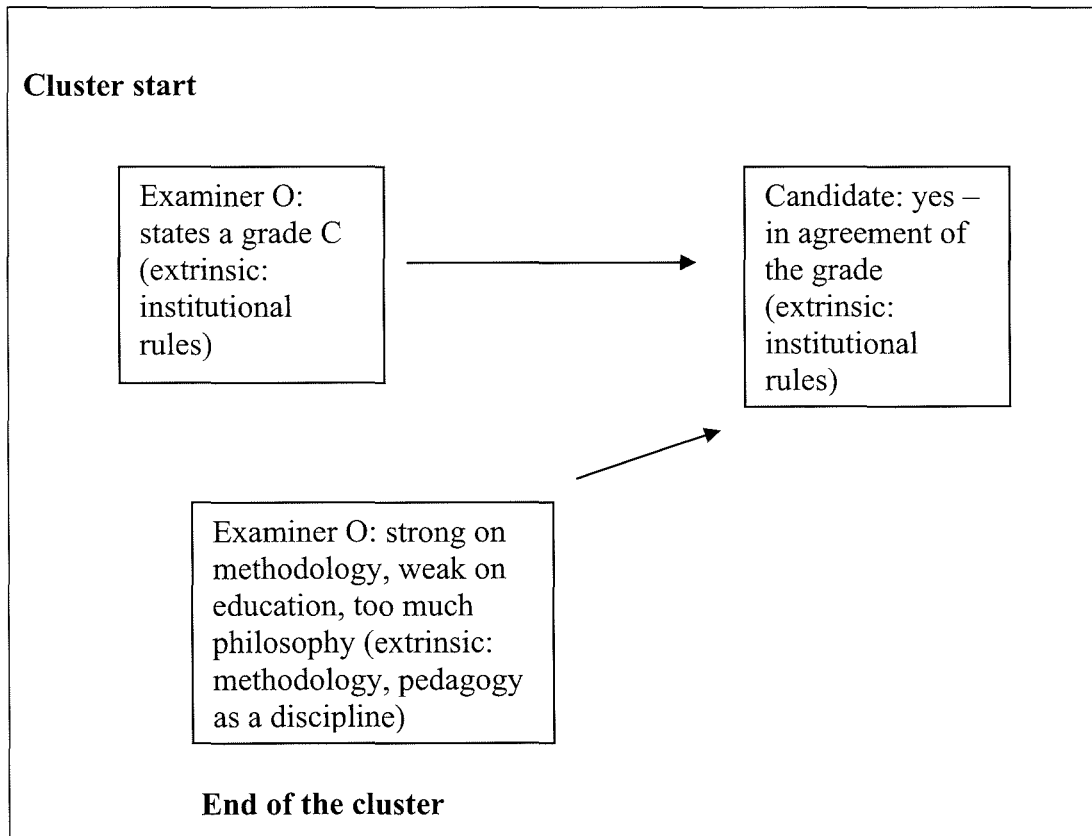
Forsvinner ja.

Som det er pedagogikk litt for vag og det blir for filosofisk.

Mer konkret

Langs slike linjer kunne data brukes til å få frem pedagogisk poeng. Så dette er vår mening Du har gjort et godt stykke arbeid. Jeg mener det er viktig at du fortsetter å jobbe med emne. Veldig viktig.

The supervisor stands and extends his hand. The candidate shakes his hand and then the hands of the two examiners who have also stood up are offered to the candidate. The candidate had no doubts he had not adequately addressed pedagogy and this was tantamount to a neglect of what should have been the dissertation's master narrative.



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Takk skal du ha. Jeg skal ta disse kommentar med meg.

# Appendix IV

## Transcription convention (adapted from Have, 1999)

(2.0) Examples of timed pauses. Pauses rounded to nearest whole second.

Square brackets aligned across adjacent lines denote overlapping talk. [ bracket shows start of overlap and ] bracket shows where the overlap stops.

.hh, hh in-breath (note the preceding fullstop) and out-breath respectively.

B:::t Colon indicating elongation of the word when pronounced.

( )Unclear talk. Some transcribers like to represent each syllable of unclear talk with a dash.

word=

=word The equals sign shows that there is no discernible pause between two speakers' turns or, if put between two sounds within a single speaker's turn, shows that they run together.

word, WORD Underlined sounds are louder, capitals louder still.

°word° material between degree signs" is quiet.

((sobbing))Transcriber's go at representing something hard, or impossible, to write phonetically. Within double brackets co-ordination of talk with corporeal and tools is also indicated.

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